

**Apocalyptic Transformations:
The Secularization of Apocalypse in Contemporary Fiction and Film**

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Abstract

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Apocalypse is a story whose main character is God, and whose narrative climax is the awarding of New Jerusalem to the faithful. Because the apocalyptic genre's defining characteristics are therefore theological, contemporary authors and filmmakers face certain unique challenges in adapting the story of Apocalypse for a secular audience.

In spite of the increasing presence of a new kind of apocalyptic story which emphasizes the destruction of the world and jettisons ideas of New Jerusalem entirely, authors continue to create apocalyptic works based on the classic paradigm. It is the position of this study that this is so because apocalypse is more than a religious story which has been passed down through the ages: it is also a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it. It is thus an organizing principle imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly-disordered universe, and a vehicle for social critique.

This thesis examines both how the late twentieth-century imagination adapts this inherently religious story for secular consumption, and why authors appropriate the apocalyptic story at all. While positing a variety of personal motives ranging from political outrage to metaphysical inquiry, it is the contention of this study that the appeal of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm is based largely on its sense-making potential and socio-critical function.

Focusing on the apocalyptic works of five contemporary authors and film-makers - comic book writer Alan Moore, film-makers Larry and Andy Wachowski, and authors Kurt Vonnegut and Don DeLillo - this thesis seeks to understand how the traditional paradigm is changed in the process of secular translation, and what is to be gained from such re-workings. Furthermore, by examining these artists' end-of-the-century engagement with the apocalyptic paradigm, it seeks to draw conclusions about the continuing appeal of the paradigm at the end of the twentieth century.

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Introduction

‘We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it...We love apocalypses too much...’

Herzog, Saul Bellow

Umberto Eco tells a story of attending a millennium-year conference during which the journalists there asked him whether he thought people feared the approaching year 2000. He replied that such fear was imaginary and that in reality people couldn’t care less. ‘The journalists,’ he relates, ‘then sank into the deepest gloom’ (David 174).

Do we, as the protagonist of Saul Bellow’s novel says, love apocalypses too much? And if we do, what is it that appeals so much about this ancient story of the End? It is, in part, the aim of this study to try to answer that question. Apocalypse is more than a religious story which has been passed down through the ages. It is also a means by which to understand the world and one’s place in it. To that end, it is an organizing principle imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly-disordered universe. This suggests, in part, why there seems to be a resurgence in a more traditional kind of apocalyptic tale in the last decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps the general sense that we live in a chaotic and potentially meaningless world, a world where, as Jean Baudrillard has written, ‘there is more and more information, and less and less meaning’, has stimulated a renewed interest in what the traditional apocalyptic paradigm has to offer: a sense of order (Simulacra and Simulation 79).

Yet the apocalyptic paradigm offers more than this sense of order. It is also a vehicle for social critique, and has always been so. The apocalyptic genre, at least in its religious incarnation, is usually written by the discontented, the minority radicalized by its powerless

position. It appeals to an audience, as D.H. Lawrence noted in Apocalypse, who is underprivileged and frustrated by its lack of power, and who respond to the tale of an unjust status quo being returned to what they see as a just one. True, apocalypse posits divine intervention rather than human problem-solving, but such intervention is always depicted as punishment for the ills of society, a corrective response to a world gone wrong. This study, then, also examines how contemporary authors and film-makers adopt the apocalyptic paradigm as a vehicle for their social critique.

The Evolution of Apocalypse

The story of apocalypse has become a part of our social consciousness, part of a mythology about Endings hovering in the cultural background which is just as real and influential as our myths of origins. This is especially true – though not, of course, exclusively - of American literature and culture. The authors examined here are all either American or, in the case of Alan Moore, have deliberately set their work in America.

As a nation founded partially on apocalyptic hopes, and whose earliest ‘literature’ is apocalyptic, America has often portrayed itself to the world and to its own people through rhetoric that reflects those leanings.¹ Conceived of by the Puritans as a place to found what John Winthrop described as a city upon a hill in his ‘A Model of Christian Charity’, the religious dissenters who made the trip to the New World saw America as a new world in

¹ The apocalypse is not the only biblical paradigm which the Puritans imagined themselves enacting when they came to the New World. Exodus clearly played an equal, if not more important, role in shaping their concept of their mission.

more ways than one: it was here they would pave the way for the imminent millennium.² These millennial beginnings are still apparent in the rhetoric of contemporary politicians who conjure images of the United States as a shining beacon, continuing to use phrases such as 'the American way' or 'the American dream' to tap into this reservoir of millennial hope and optimism, or alternatively adopting an apocalyptic vocabulary to refer to America's enemies, as Reagan and George W. Bush did respectively with their 'evil empire' and 'axis of evil' speeches.

From the sermons of Cotton Mather to the lifeboat coffin of Melville's Moby Dick (1851) and the apocalyptically-charged warning about race relations in Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison, there is no question that the apocalyptic theme, in one form or another, has been a strong one throughout American literary history (Lewicki xii). At the same time, the concept of apocalypse which has found its way into literature has changed greatly over the years. As Lewicki notes:

For the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century preachers, apocalypse signified a real event. They constructed their visions around what they believed to be the inescapable fate of the world. When the idea entered literature, it became a metaphor, a conventional set of images that were used to describe nothing more than the end of the world of one novel. (xii-xiii)

The link which Lewicki proposes between the changes in the apocalyptic paradigm and its transition into secular literature has some validity. But his argument that the paradigm has become nothing more than a way to conclude a single novel's world seems overly narrow. While the paradigm has been adopted at times in such a way as to signal

² Citing the diaries and letters of Columbus as evidence, Lois Parkins Zamora traces this apocalyptic envisioning of America even further back to the Spanish explorers and colonizers of North America (Writing the Apocalypse 7-8). See my chapter on DeLillo (p. 226) for a specific allusion to the 'city on a hill' in his novel White Noise.

only the end of the world of single novels, it has also been adapted by other authors to signal ends of a far more general, indeed universal, kind.

It is this particular change in the concept of apocalypse which has been most notable in the literature of the past two centuries. We have seen a movement of the apocalyptic paradigm not merely from a religious to a secular story, but also from an optimistic to a pessimistic one. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen the appearance of a new form of the apocalyptic paradigm, one greatly changed from the original but which has had just as great an influence on apocalyptic sensibilities and story-telling.

A Sea Change

When, on September 12, 2001, the London *Daily Mail* ran a front-page photograph of the collapsing World Trade Center with the headline 'APOCALYPSE!' the choice of headline made explicit what had been an implicit change in the conventional understanding of the term *apocalyptic*. (Appendix A) The application of the word *apocalypse* to this image of disaster was indicative of the profound shift from a descriptive term that referred specifically to the optimistic biblical story of ultimate judgment and reward to an adjective now understood to be a synonym for the merely catastrophic or devastating.

The altered colloquial meaning of the term *apocalypse* has been accompanied by an alteration in the original paradigm, as well. This altered form of the apocalyptic paradigm retains some of the elements of the traditional story of apocalypse, but often leaves out the element of New Jerusalem, the divine kingdom which is the reward of the faithful. The

result is that a story which once was grounded in hope about the future has become instead a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe. Where the underlying message of the original paradigm was optimistic, anticipating God's intervening hand to make things right, the changed paradigm has more in common with the jeremiad, a lamentation over the degeneracy of the world. And where God intervenes in this newer paradigm it is not to bring back order to a disordered world, but only to express a literally all-consuming and punishing anger.

The traditional narrative paradigm which came to be known as Apocalypse was fully-formed only with the advent of Christianity. It has narrative antecedents in the Old Testament, and Norman Cohn, in Cosmos, Chaos & the World to Come, has traced the individual components of the apocalyptic story to ancient civilizations such as those of the Vedic Indian, Egyptian, Persian, Mesopotamian and Greek. But the word *apocalypse* does not appear before it is specifically attached to the Book of Revelation (Collins 3). The etymological root of the word is the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning 'unveiling' or 'uncovering', and thus it refers specifically to the divine revelation of John of Patmos in which he is shown the coming struggle between good and evil and God's ultimate judgment upon the world.

The most notable apocalyptic story in the Old Testament is the Book of Daniel, from

which it appears John took much of his source material.³ John drew on Old Testament suggestions of the inheritance of a divine kingdom to construct his New Jerusalem and he solidified general notions of judgment into a specific Last Judgment; but where the Christian apocalypse really diverged from its Jewish predecessor was in its depiction of an actual Savior resurrected from the dead to defeat evil and lead the saved to their eternal reward, a life of divine inhabitation in the New Jerusalem.

The events which comprise the Apocalypse are very specific in John's revelation: the Great Tribulation during which the Antichrist will appear and reign on earth; the Second Coming of Christ; the ensuing battle between the forces of good and evil in which the Antichrist is ultimately overthrown and the world and its sinners destroyed; and the Last Judgment in which God sits in judgment upon all souls, living and dead, and confers both reward and punishment as He sees fit.

The inheritance of New Jerusalem is a crucial part of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. Indeed, despite the emphasis on the destructive wrath of God, an emphasis which is made clear both through the pointedly detailed descriptions of the devastation and the proportionately larger amount of time devoted to it, New Jerusalem is the *raison d'être* of the traditional apocalyptic narrative.

Apocalyptic literature is a genre which is written to comfort the persecuted, to exhort them to maintain their faith in the midst of trying times and to assure them that they will ultimately be rewarded for their faithfulness while their enemies will be vanquished. Such narrative is often the response of a group experiencing an event perceived to disrupt their

³ See also Ezekiel 38-9, Isaiah 24-7, Book of Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch. In the New Testament see Mark 13 and Matthew 24-25. A host of other extra-canonical apocalyptic texts also exist and have been collected in The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Vol. 1 Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments (Ed. James H. Charlesworth, 1983) and New Testament Apocrypha: Writings Related to the Apostles Apocalypses and Related Subjects (Ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, 1992).

historical continuity, and is in part an effort to make sense of events which seemingly make no sense in a community's vision of itself and its history.⁴ It is 'an attempt by a culture that is genuinely puzzled and deeply disturbed to understand itself and its own time' (Dewey, In a Dark Time 10).

Thus, the Book of Daniel is the result of the diaspora of the Israelites during the reign of Antiochus IV. Cast out of their homeland and dispersed in such a way as to become powerless, the writer of Daniel offers comfort to the outcasts in an eschatological vision which promises that order will ultimately be restored to the present chaos, that evil will be overthrown and the righteous raised up again. Joseph Dewey explains:

In a culture caught by a crisis that challenges the very undergirdings of its makeup - its people suspended in graceless poses of helplessness, uncertainty, and fear - visionaries puzzle out a way of setting the present crisis within a larger context, a pattern greater than ever suspected, and judge that the crisis at hand is certainly of considerable dimension but is nevertheless part of an order as wide as the cosmos itself, an order that points humanity toward nothing less than the finale of its history. (In a Dark Time 10)

Yet, as Frank Kermode has noted, apocalypse is 'patient of change and of historiographical sophistications. It allows itself to be diffused, blended with other varieties of fiction - tragedy, for example, myths of Empire and Decadence - and yet it can survive in

⁴ There is a wide consensus among scholars that the apocalyptic genre is one born of socio-political crisis. Leonard L. Thompson and John J. Collins both offer alternative views, however. Collins rejects this theory outright, and Thompson, claiming the consensus view is reductive, suggests that 'perceived crisis' more accurately describes the motivation for writing apocalyptic stories. Collins bases his rejection on an examination of the social and political contexts surrounding the creation of certain well known apocalyptic literature. Thompson's theory hinges on a semantic nicety. To my mind it matters little to the person or community which believes it is in crisis whether the world at large would judge it to be; perception is all in this matter, and it would be accurate, I believe, to claim that the apocalyptic literature created by such a community is still motivated by crisis.

very naïve forms' (8-9). The apocalyptic paradigm is both 'long-lived' and changeable (Kermode 29). Over time, the apocalyptic response to this sense of crisis has changed.

One change in the form has seen the apocalyptic genre's message of hope largely subsumed by its emphasis on destruction, even though the main intent of the traditional story of apocalypse was to provide its listeners and readers with hope of a better world. These grimmer eschatological tales are strictly stories of Endings. Such stories, which I am calling 'neo-apocalyptic', are focused solely on cataclysm. They neither offer, nor anticipate a New Jerusalem, *per se*. To this extent, then, neo-apocalyptic literature is a literature of negativity and pessimism; it functions largely as a cautionary tale, positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends. If these tales exhibit judgment, it is of the sort that assumes that no one deserves saving and that everyone should be punished. The traditional optimistic conclusion and intent to exhort faith disappear in neo-apocalyptic literature, replaced by imaginative but definitive End scenarios.

This sea-change has been noted by scholars, some of whom argue that apocalypse without its accompanying motif of renewal is not apocalypse at all, and others who acknowledge this altered form of the eschatological vision by categorizing the pessimistic strain of the story as a sub-category of the apocalyptic genre. Literary critics interested in this change have attempted both to account for it and track its development.

Zbigniew Lewicki, whose book The Bang and the Whimper argues that American literature has been dominated by the two competing tropes of apocalypse and entropy, ties the loss of New Jerusalem to the increasing dominance of entropy as the representative American trope of universal ending (xv). While he identifies stories which follow either

trope as conceptually 'apocalyptic' in that they prefigure the End, he does acknowledge that apocalypse and entropy are distinct in many ways:

One is physical, the other metaphysical; one is based on moral distinctions, the other on indifferent scientific laws; one promises violent destruction and regeneration, the other slow but irreversible decay; one leaves room for hope, the other does not. Yet by describing the end of the world both concepts transcend our experience and go beyond our reality. (xv-xvi)

For Lewicki, the defining elements of an apocalyptic work are the presence of 'the Antichrist figure, the battle between the forces of light and the powers of darkness, and the destruction of the book's world by violent means' (xiv). In this way he is able to include in his study of apocalyptic works narratives which lack a New Jerusalem of any kind.

Lewicki accounts for the movement from apocalypse to entropy in a number of ways.⁵ He attributes the 'reduced role of the concept of rebirth in the apocalyptic structure' to 'the increasing secularization of American life' (xiv). He also points to the many social and economic changes happening in the nineteenth century - 'The new waves of non-Protestant immigrants, the influence of expanding capitalism, the political events of the period, including the devastating Civil War' (xiv) - as well as a profound shift in man's attitude toward and understanding of the universe due to 'the great scientific revolution of the late nineteenth century [shattering] the foundations of Newtonian physics' (71). In part, he argues, the loss of New Jerusalem 'indicates a fundamental change that occurred when the concept of apocalypse was adopted by secular literature' (xiv).

Arguing that literature which 'omits symbolism of re-creation as an integral part of its aesthetic structure is obviously not traditional, although it may certainly be considered

⁵ See Peter Freese's From Apocalypse to Entropy and Beyond: The Second Law of Thermodynamics in Post-War American Fiction for a very thorough examination of the entropic theme.

apocalyptic' (39), John R. May also specifically links the newer, pessimistic strain of apocalyptic narrative to secularization and to a specifically American innovation of translating the traditional apocalyptic paradigm into 'a secular or worldly analogue' (215):

From the beginning...the American tradition for literary apocalypse has manifested a tendency to use the traditional symbols, not to instill a realistic acceptance of the agony of history, but rather for the very purpose apocalypse seemed originally aimed at defeating – despair amid the ravages of time. Loss of faith and its attendant self-understanding alone can explain this dramatic shift in purpose. With the blight of secularization already attacking the roots of religious faith, it is not surprising that the literary imagination developed its own everyday analogue for the images of classical apocalypse. (227)

Like Lewicki, May includes narratives without New Jerusalem in his study, separating the newer strains into two categories he identifies as apocalypses of humor and apocalypses of despair. Arguing that 'all secular apocalypse is one in the absence of any clear vision of the future of man', May dubs the kind of apocalyptic story which 'seems positively to deny the possibility of a future', apocalypses of despair (215), and those which treat the human predicament as absurd, apocalypses of humor. The latter he argues are, after a time, hopeful, but it is a hope

based on psychological necessity rather than a religious faith. It is fundamentally a wish that man will prevail, that somehow we can show our fellow man the minimal respect that is necessary to keep us from destroying each other....the cataclysm is a product of technological intelligence and personal stupidity. Common to humorous apocalypse is the absence of a vision of the new. Its absence is not necessarily a denial of its possibility; rather it is a simple admission at most of the present impossibility of imagining one. Through an affirmation of some saving quality in man, humorous apocalypse does affirm the future; it simply refrains from imagining it concretely. (217)

While May has rather neatly discerned a difference in emotional tenor which occurs in these tales, his argument that all secular apocalypse lacks a vision of the future is clearly incorrect, as this study hopes to make clear.

Taking a different tack in his book American Apocalypses, Douglas Robinson proposes reading apocalyptic narratives not as visions of the end so much as of transition, an idea also present in Kermode's work. Using the root *eschaton* ('the furthestmost boundary') as his prompt, Robinson reads the American self as a transitional one which must 'define the old and the deferred new from his intermediate position' (52). He interprets American apocalypses as 'investigations into the edge, the boundary, the interface between radically different realms' (xii), and suggests that the way to approach apocalyptic literature, therefore, is according to its interpretative or hermeneutic stance. This is a particularly useful approach, he argues, because the word 'apocalyptic' has become such a vague one. Is a narrative apocalyptic, he asks,

because it conveys a sense of ontological crisis that generates existential dread, as Sidney P. Moss argues? Or is it apocalyptic because, as Todd M. Lieber maintains, it achieves an imaginative isolation from an intolerable reality, spinning out of a psychological fantasy world that is more real than reality itself? Or is it apocalyptic because, as David Ketterer suggests, it points to an arabesque realm beyond our world? Because each of these critics adopts a polemical interpretative stance that pointedly excludes all others, the reader is left in a quandary. The apocalypse can be any or all of these things; perhaps it is none of them. (11-12)

In response, Robinson creates a range of what he calls apocalyptic hermeneutics, some of which include a New Jerusalem and some of which do not. He applies similar latitude about the inclusion or exclusion of almost all the elements which have traditionally

been part of apocalyptic narrative. His categories include hermeneutics which leave out the figure of God entirely, which internalize the apocalyptic struggle as a metaphor for personal growth, which even leave out the End (26-7). Robinson's is a generous interpretation to be sure, but, it seems to me, a singularly unhelpful one in discussions of the genre because it casts its net so wide.

David Ketterer has adopted a narrower, and potentially more fruitful, critical stance. Ketterer does not discount New Jerusalem as an identifying feature of the genre, but interprets it far more flexibly than the original paradigm does. For Ketterer, any work is apocalyptic which is 'concerned with presenting a radically different world or version of reality that exists in a credible relationship with the world or reality verified by empiricism and common experience' (91).

Ketterer's main concern is with apocalypse as a theme or motif in science fiction and he contends that the creation of 'new worlds' is represented in two analogous processes in science fiction, the first being the creation of a 'literal' new world, and the second being the creation of new philosophical understanding of the universe:

Apocalyptic literature is concerned with the creation of other worlds which exist, on the literal level, in a credible relationship (whether on the basis of rational extrapolation and analogy or of religious belief) with the 'real' world, thereby causing a metaphorical destruction of that 'real' world in the reader's head. The apocalyptic imagination may finally be defined in terms of its philosophical preoccupation with that moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation or transfiguration when an old world of mind discovers a believable new world of mind, which either nullifies and destroys the old system entirely, or less likely, makes it part of a larger design. (13)

Here, Ketterer identifies an important idea for the study of the apocalyptic paradigm in secular literature: that the world which is renovated may not be a literal world at all, but a philosophical view of it, a worldview rather than a world.

Scholars such as Joseph Dewey, W. Warren Wagar, and Frances Carey have all connected the ascendance of the pessimistic strain of apocalyptic narrative specifically to the twentieth century and its events. Carey, who edited the impressive catalogue which accompanied the British Museum's 1999 exhibition on apocalypse, sees a connection between the changed tone of apocalyptic work and the larger artistic movement we call Modernism, pointing to the 'cultural pessimism and social alienation' that pervaded the time period, and which resulted in a climate that Andrei Bely called 'the sensation of the abyss' (270).

Both Dewey and Wagar have traced the noticeable change in the apocalyptic narrative to the time of the first nuclear explosion. Wagar's focus in Terminal Visions is largely the eschatological vision in science fiction, while Dewey chooses to examine what he calls the 'apocalyptic temper' reflected in more mainstream and secular literature. Both critics, however, see the explosion at Hiroshima as a turning point in the approach to the genre generally.

Wagar suggests that the transition from 'sacred to secular' eschatology had mostly been completed by the early nineteenth century, when, in response to the various social and political upheavals of the time, 'thoughts of the end once more [became] fully relevant to the cultural situation of Western Man' (61). While Wagar argues that the fear of the doomsday weapon or bomb is just a specialized case of the fear of science - that 'man will demolish, dehumanize, or enslave himself by his own cleverness, and especially by too much headlong

progress in science and technology' (25) – he does note that 'a larger number of writers in the literary mainstream turn to speculative fiction and to the subgenre of secular eschatology' after 1945 (24).⁶

Dewey, on the other hand, characterizes the move away from the traditional optimistic paradigm as an 'exhaustion that parallels a wider, more complicated cultural drift from God' and claims that the 'key to understanding this emerging impotence is the growing sense, during the last two centuries, that the end of the world is a fiction' (In a Dark Time 16). He identifies three kinds of literary endtimes: the cataclysmic imagination, which focuses on the method of the End; literature with a millennialist spirit, which 'accepts endings most cheerfully because of the fanatic commitment to better worlds emerging from the ruins'; and literature of the apocalyptic temper, which stands between the 'default' of the cataclysmic imagination with its 'huddled masses waiting for judgment or for simple execution' and the 'deferment' of the millennialist spirit which 'imposes on humanity an interminable sentence of waiting' (In a Dark Time 13). The apocalyptic temper offers:

a way of collective coping, a way of seeing history, and a way of understanding a contemporary world by accepting the very grimmest evidence of decline and professing nevertheless a healthy conviction that history need not be consigned to simple contingency because, for the moment, questions loom too large for adequate response. (In a Dark Time 14)

Only with Hiroshima, Dewey argues, does an event significantly disruptive and crisis-like in history occur to renew the apocalyptic temper in American apocalyptic narrative, which prior to that had largely been concerned with the cataclysmic imagination.

⁶ Paul Boyer agrees that the atomic bomb initially 'unleashed a flood of literary productivity', particularly among science fiction and speculative fiction writers, but argues that the response among mainstream writers was slower to come. See pages 243-56 in particular.

It is with Dewey's characterization of Hiroshima as a turning point in apocalyptic narrative and Douglas Robinson's preoccupation with the idea of the *eschaton* being the 'furthestmost boundary' that this particular study begins. For if the beginning of the atomic age at Hiroshima signals anything, it seems to me to be this outermost boundary.

Hiroshima is the modern equivalent of the written warnings on medieval maps which read 'Here be dragons'. It is the point beyond which human survival becomes questionable, the explosion and subsequent radiation poisoning marking a boundary between a world in which human beings thrive and one in which they potentially cannot survive.⁷ Moreover, both ethically and as a species concerned with its own survival, it marks a point beyond which we *should not* venture. Hiroshima is the closest secular equivalent we have to the fire and brimstone promised by Christianity as a consequence of sin. Hiroshima presents a hell-on-earth as vivid as Revelation's heaven-on-earth imagery.

The language used to describe the tests at Alamogordo and the bombings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima reflected this subtext.⁸ As Dewey notes, 'the language of the nuclear age intoned as well a darker vocabulary borrowed from Revelation' (*In a Dark Time* 6-7):

Searching for words able to capture the implications of the mushroom cloud, journalists, military leaders, politicians (most prominently, Truman and Churchill), and even the atomic scientists themselves found sufficient language in the radical vocabulary of religion. (*In a Dark Time* 5)

⁷ Cf. Ketterer on this point: 'It is, then, particularly relevant to our ambiguous, secularized understanding of the apocalyptic that, while atomic power might destroy our world, the same power might allow a remnant of humanity to escape the conflagration and seek a new and better Earth amid a new view of the heavens' (95). No better example of this sort of narrative exists than Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959).

⁸ See William L. Laurence's official account of the Trinity test, *Dawn Over Zero* (1946), as an example.

A tangible boundary of the End, then, the advent of the nuclear age could not help but be a catalyst for renewed consideration of the eschatological vision. As the nation which possessed and used atomic weapons, it was perhaps inevitable that the American imagination should be more gripped with this vision than others.⁹ As the hoped-for world détente failed to develop, as the realization of the enormity and brutality of the Holocaust set in, as the Cold War became colder and more dangerous, it was perhaps just as inevitable that these eschatological visions should become more pessimistic.¹⁰

Indeed, during the 1950s and 1960s one can find a whole body of literature whose tone is eschatological and alarming. No doubt the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam played a part in continuing to inspire these modern jeremiads, as, almost certainly, did the Rosenberg trial, McCarthy hearings, Civil Rights struggle and Watergate scandal which convinced a great number that America was a rudderless ship. In Norman Mailer's Armies of the Night (1968), Kurt Vonnegut's Mother Night (1962) and Cat's Cradle (1963), Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961), James Baldwin's The Fire Next Time (1963), and Hunter S. Thompson's Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail (1972) we have some of the best examples of the evolving pessimistic strain of apocalyptic writing which appears to have developed in response to the events of the mid-twentieth century.

However, the focus of this study is ultimately not this neo-apocalyptic body of work. While there can be no question that there has been an evolution in apocalyptic literature

⁹ One would expect that Japan might be the other nation so gripped, but the Japanese imagination appears to have been more preoccupied with the results of atomic weapons usage, a preoccupation reflected, for instance, in the numerous monster movies of the Godzilla ilk in which the monster is the result of excessive nuclear radiation. As the nation which had to grapple with *surviving* two nuclear explosions, such a preoccupation seems logical. See Jerome F. Shapiro for more on the Japanese response.

¹⁰ The Holocaust is the other 'furthestmost boundary' worth considering here. Instead of a technological apocalypse, the Holocaust is an apocalypse of the human spirit, and arguably unique in being a 'double' apocalypse in that it simultaneously contains a physical ending for the victims and a metaphysical ending for the witnesses who believed it signaled an end to faith in humanism (or humanity).

towards a far more pessimistic sensibility, my own sense is that this evolution has been so radical that it has resulted in a new genus in the family of eschatological tales. New Jerusalem and the hope it symbolizes is such an integral part of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm that to ignore or discard the concept creates an eschatological narrative which is different in kind, and not just degree, from the traditional sort. This seems particularly so because the intent of these two kinds of stories is so entirely different. The traditional paradigm is an optimistic one meant to lend hope and bolster faith while the newer version of the paradigm holds out only the promise of undifferentiated punishment, a dissimilarity worth noting. While all apocalyptic rhetoric is pessimistic in the sense that it assumes humanity cannot renovate itself, the traditional paradigm clearly differentiates between those deserving punishment and those who deserve saving. Moreover, it posits a deity who can and will intervene to save those who deserve saving. The neo-apocalyptic paradigm assumes that all mankind is completely beyond renovation, that degeneracy is so complete that the Ending can only be so, too. There is nothing beyond this Ending, no hope of a New Kingdom, precisely because there is nothing worth saving.

Of more interest to me is the continued appearance - despite the prevailing mood of gloom - of the *traditional* paradigm in our secular literature. Thus, the object of this study is the authors and artists who, resisting the absolutism of the neo-apocalyptic pessimism, have found themselves more attracted to the message of hope inherent in the traditional apocalyptic paradigm, even when their own lack of religious conviction means they have had to re-figure that hope in other terms.

The confusion of interrupted history

‘We are here to make a choice between the quick and the dead. That is our business. Behind the black portent of the new atomic age lies a hope which, seized upon with faith, can work out a salvation. If we fail, then we have damned every man to be the slave of fear. Let us not deceive ourselves: we must elect world peace or world destruction’.

Bernard Baruch, Speech to UN Atomic Energy Commission, 14 August 1946

Are the writers and artists discussed in this study a vanguard signaling a resurgence of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm, or has the traditional paradigm never really gone away? The answer to both these questions is a qualified yes. Though the dominant apocalyptic paradigm of second half of the twentieth century appears to have been the neo-apocalyptic one, there is evidence that the traditional paradigm has continued to influence creative minds, particularly when we take into account the kind of reinterpretation of a New Jerusalem motif that David Ketterer suggests. We have excellent examples of the traditional apocalyptic sensibility at work in such novels as Walter M. Miller’s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959), Russell Hoban’s Riddley Walker (1980) and Robert Coover’s The Universal Baseball Association (1968) and The Public Burning (1977). To this end, therefore, it appears that the traditional paradigm may not have been overcome so much as overshadowed by the neo-apocalyptic form.

As to the question of whether the authors in this study, whose work falls in a relatively narrow band of time of about fifteen years, are indicative of a quantifiable trend, it is impossible to know at this stage. It seems telling that in such a compressed time period a variety of creative imaginations working in such varied formats all seem to be formulating

creative responses, whether consciously or not, to the more traditional form of the paradigm. What exactly this is telling *of*, however, it is too early to say.

Nonetheless, one can try to devise some suppositions as to why there might be a renewed interest in the traditional paradigm. First among these requires a challenge to the notion of secularization which many of the previously mentioned critics take as a given. Even if we grant that increasing secularization accompanied the industrial revolution, it is certainly not the case at this juncture in history. In fact the exact opposite is true, as William H. Swatos, Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano make clear in their study on the issue. All the data points to the fact that America is not, in fact, becoming more secularized (8). While religious institutions, particularly Christian ones, and membership in them appear to have been declining over the past several decades in Europe, there has been a simultaneous *increase* of religious feeling among young people (Chu 25).¹¹

The United States has experienced a similar trend.¹² A 2004 Gallup poll found that 90% of the Americans it surveyed professed a belief in God. E.J. Dionne, Jr., co-chair of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, identifies the 1960s as a time that, while perceived by those on the right as increasingly secular, was paradoxically

also the beginning of a kind of spiritual search that, for a lot of people, ended up in various forms of deep religious feeling. Whether it was the rise of evangelicalism, the rise of a new orthodoxy among Jews, there was a sense that the spiritual mattered. I think you've seen that play out from the late 1960s to the current time... (Dionne)

¹¹ 'Overall, "an increase in religion among youth is very clear", says French sociologist Yves Lambert. Among Danes, the number of 18-to-29-year-olds who professed belief in God leapt from 30% of youth in 1981 to 49% in 1999. In Italy, the jump was from 75% to 87%. Even in France, which has Europe's highest proportion of atheists, the figure crept from 44% to 47%' (Chu 29).

¹² The scope of this study does not include Islam, but Islam, too, has apocalyptic paradigms of its own, some of which – the heavenly vista which martyrs supposedly inherit, for example – we currently find very much overtly in public view because of the increased visibility of radical Islam.

Possibly of more relevance, participation in Christianity of both the fundamental and evangelical type appears to be increasing in America (Cizik).¹³

And while piety seems to be on the increase in general, the attacks of September 2001 appear to have stimulated an interest in end-time theology in particular. The Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins *Left Behind* series, a secularized re-telling of the events of the Book of Revelation, had sold more than sixty million copies as of 2004 (www.leftbehind.com), the Rapture Index hit an all-time high predictor for the 'end of the world' on September 24, 2001 (raptureready.com), and according to a 2002 Time/CNN poll:

more than one-third of Americans say they are paying more attention now to how the news might relate to the end of the world, and have talked about what the Bible has to say on the subject. Fully 59% say they believe the events in *Revelation* are going to come true, and nearly one-quarter think the Bible predicted the Sept. 11 attack. (Gibbs 42)

Though the events of 2001 occurred too late to influence the writers of the texts studied here, I would argue that such responses to 9/11 are part of a larger pattern of renewed interest in endtime narrative, and that the current direction of that eschatological response – in particular towards rebuilding and renewal – demonstrates the continuing appeal and psychic need for a concept of New Jerusalem, in which the End is not merely the neo-apocalyptic disaster or catastrophe, but figures that destruction as a prelude to renewal.

At the same time, one should not underestimate the psychological effect that Hiroshima had on the creative imagination. The atomic bomb was a tangible reminder, one

¹³ Perhaps reflecting this trend, at least three of the country's recent presidents have characterized themselves as evangelical or 'born-again' Christians: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush.

that could not be ignored, of the End (or one Ending). It relocated considerations of the End from the realm of the theoretical and placed them squarely in the realm of the possible.

Paradoxically, though, the psychological impact of the atomic bomb was so great that it initially appears to have stymied the creative response. In his seminal By the Dawn's Early Light, Paul Boyer notes that 'the atomic bomb is notable by its absence' in the major novels of the post-Hiroshima period (246). While after Hiroshima there was much written warning of the danger of atomic war, the atomic bomb only appeared in mainstream creative work 'in allusive and tentative ways' (247), a counterintuitive (lack of) creative response which Boyer attributes to the difficulty of trying to find a 'proper aesthetic for the bomb' and 'a recognition of the folly of too quickly trying to assimilate this monstrous novelty' (250).¹⁴

Joseph Dewey has also noted how the literary response to the atomic bomb seemed to have been delayed: 'the literary conscience of America did not seem ready in the 1940s and even in the 1950s to engage the menace of the mushroom cloud' (In a Dark Time 8). It was not until the 1960s, Dewey posits, that American novelists, spurred on in part by the Cuban Missile Crisis, were ready to both exhume and examine the buried nuclear fear which had become a part of the backdrop of the American psyche after Hiroshima (9). The delayed creative response may also explain, in part, why there seem to be greater numbers of apocalyptic works some decades after the fact, rather than an initial surge of work immediately following it

The fact that a cluster of apocalyptic works appears in the last years of the century suggests - Umberto Eco's anecdote notwithstanding - that the winding down of the twentieth

¹⁴ Similar problems surround the representation of the Holocaust, both as to how to represent such an event and why artistic reaction was delayed.

century reverberated creatively with authors and artists. The approach of the century's end no doubt inspired consideration of endings in general, and the traditional fears about millennium likely focused those thoughts into more specific consideration of the paradigmatic narrative of the End, whether consciously or not.

Each of these items may in part account for an interest in the eschatological vision in general during this time, but what accounts for the renewed interest in the traditional apocalyptic paradigm specifically? Here I'm going to posit a convergence of historical events with eschatological implications, a growing climate of fear as regards them, and an equally powerful sense that the paradigms by which we have tried to understand and interpret our world have become unstable, perhaps unusable. This nexus of social mood and historical condition causes a climate of uncertainty which the traditional apocalyptic paradigm is well-structured to address.

We must begin by returning momentarily to the idea of apocalyptic narrative as a response to history, or rather a particular sort of history. The apocalyptic sensibility has often been attacked as a means of 'withdrawing' from history. That is, the reliance on divine intervention to mete out justice and effectively end history has been seen, most notably by Martin Buber, Robert Alter and D.H. Lawrence, as a justification for human passivity in the face of history, an excuse of sorts for refusing to attempt to influence events.

But if the apocalyptic sensibility is, as so many critics have argued, directly related to a community's sense that there has been a radical disruption to its history, is not such passivity inherently *forced* upon the community (since the event which has disrupted it is

beyond its control)? Such a community, regardless of whether it is a minority one, is likely already feeling a helplessness both to affect events and to understand them.

Lois Parkinson Zamora has framed her exploration of apocalyptic story-telling against this precise context:

The apocalypticist describes the broad strokes of history by which human beings are moved. Novelists who employ the images and narrative perspectives of apocalypse are likely, therefore, to focus less on the psychological interaction of their characters than on the complex historical and/or cosmic forces in whose cross-currents those characters are caught. (Writing the Apocalypse 3)

Zamora's argument is biased somewhat because of her focus on apocalyptic Latin American narratives in which this interest in history is clearly a feature. Particularly since the elements of the apocalyptic paradigm become more flexibly represented in secular literature, writers may adapt an apocalyptic hermeneutic stance which addresses any number of things other than history alone, including the psychological interaction of characters which Zamora more or less rules out. That said, I think that Zamora is correct to draw this important link between the apocalyptic paradigm and history when she writes that novelists who use the paradigm are 'concerned to create comprehensive fictions of historical order' (Writing the Apocalypse 4).

My sense is that the operative word here is 'order', for the imposition of the apocalyptic paradigm onto one's experience is a feasible, if extreme, way of making sense of dislocating historical events. It 'resists the crisis of change by inculcating change into its very vocabulary', assuring its listener that 'the apparent disorder of history will finally affirm order' (Dewey, In a Dark Time 11).

Thus, I am positing that the apocalyptic impulse is, in effect, a sense-making one, and one of more ancient lineage than more recent sense-making paradigms such as conspiracy or chaos theory. Moreover, the traditional apocalyptic paradigm has an advantage over these more recent paradigms of sense-making in that it allows for a moral dimension. Because judgment is as important an element of the original story as New Jerusalem, the traditional apocalyptic paradigm has within it the natural ability to be a vehicle for the analysis and critique of behavior, whether of individual, nation, or even cosmos. It therefore stands apart from sense-making paradigms like conspiracy, with its mysterious and confrontational Us vs. Them sensibility, or chaos theory, with its morally neutral and scientific stance.¹⁵ It is an organizing structure which can offer order in both a physical and moral sense, holding out the possibility of social critique and reorientation in the midst of a disorienting historical moment.

Frank Kermode's seminal work in A Sense of an Ending is of obvious relevance here. Kermode recognized that even if the apocalyptic paradigm changes, it continues 'to lie under our ways of making sense of the world' (28). 'Our interest in [ends],' as he has written, 'reflects our deep need for intelligible Ends' (8). Kermode is primarily interested in the End as it applies to fictional endings, a notion to which I will return, but he is also interested in how our stories – or myths – reflect that sense of Ending. Thus he fixes particularly on the idea of crisis. It is with this point that I want to anchor my proposal that a renewed interest in the traditional apocalyptic paradigm is related to its ability to act as a special kind of sense-making paradigm.

¹⁵ See Michael Barkun for more on conspiracy and its relationship to political apocalypticism.

A sense of a disordered world

...the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupifies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents...

Philip Roth

One need not be part of a persecuted community for the sense-making element of the apocalyptic paradigm to have an appeal, merely part of one which feels adrift. The sense of being adrift might be the result of a perceived disruption to the continuity of a community's sense of identity or of history, or it might be the result of the collapse of the paradigms which have previously provided a sense of structure and meaning. In the post-nuclear age, we see both of these things happening simultaneously.¹⁶

The pervasive sense in Western culture of permanent crisis is a reflection of this dual breakdown (and what led Jacques Derrida to note in his 1984 article 'Economies de la crises' that the concept of *crisis* is in crisis). This is why the atomic bomb is such an important marker: the mere existence of nuclear arms, not to mention the arms race, plays a considerable role in the sense of permanent crisis.¹⁷ In addition to the nuclear crisis (more recently joined by fears of biological and chemical crisis), however, one might think of a number of other events or intellectual shifts which have disrupted continuity.

¹⁶ Robinson's attention to the idea of boundaries may serve in a different capacity here, for there is always the possibility, as I argue in this study, that the *loss* of boundaries is an equally important catalyst for a resurgence of the traditional paradigm. Kermode's reading of apocalypse as a period of transition seems relevant here.

¹⁷ James Berger suggests that the sense of permanent crisis co-exists with the sense that the 'conclusive catastrophe has already occurred' and that our eschatological visions are therefore post-apocalyptic rather than apocalyptic (xiii). A more sensible argument would be that our *mode* of fear is constantly evolving and that while the sense of crisis may be permanent, the thing we perceive *as* the crisis may change, or rather that we perceive multiple crises, rather than a single crisis.

Certainly the post-nuclear age has seen radical disruption in notions of cultural identity. The greater physical access to other populations and the widespread availability of media which increases our exposure to them has meant a noticeable change from homogenous populations with distinct cultural markers to more heterogeneous ones where cultural distinctions blur. Pure cultural identity begins to break down as it becomes common to eat Punjabi food in England, learn African dance or Ashtanga yoga in American gym classes, or watch the American television show 'Friends' in Japan.

The disruption of cultural identity pales in comparison, however, with the disruption – psychological and physical – caused by three events of this century, of which the nuclear bomb was the first. The AIDS epidemic and the threat of global warming and related world-wide ecological destruction are the two other events (or conditions) which are not only as far-reaching and enormous in influence as the nuclear bomb, but also have analogous biblical – that is, apocalyptic – motifs in plague and world destruction. Unlike influential political events which, though they can disrupt greatly, tend to do so on a local level, the AIDS epidemic, nuclear bomb and global ecological destruction affect the entire world. The enormity of and all-encompassing nature of these crises threaten human existence on a global level, and the awareness of this enormity contributes to a growing sense of uncertainty about our place in the world and the viability of our future.¹⁸

At the same time, the paradigms by which we have attempted to understand and interpret the world on both a global and local level continue to shift and sometimes disintegrate altogether. Kermode mentions the paradigms of Empire and decadence as

¹⁸ Though each of these events has the potential to cause the kind of historical disruption which might lead to an apocalyptic sensibility, Dewey is correct to focus on the atomic bomb as the most *tangible*, that is the mostly easily represented, of these signs of crisis. Though pestilence can be represented, it as yet has no iconic representation that compares with the immediacy of the mushroom cloud which Dewey singles out specifically as a marker of cultural anxiety about the nuclear age and its perils.

examples, but one could think of many others. The Newtonian vision of the universe has been radically altered by discoveries in non-Euclidean geometry and quantum physics. The teleological paradigm of Progress was first challenged by Darwin's evolutionary theory, and later by high capitalism, urbanization, and medical and scientific ethical quandaries which were unthinkable only decades ago. The binary Superpower model of world politics was dismantled with the Berlin Wall. Indeed, information, or our access to it, increases at such exponential rates that the imposition of any paradigm upon it seems more and more unlikely. Our information appears to increase while our means of making sense of it decreases.

The concept we think of as Postmodernism seems to reflect this lack of coherence, refusing to impose one point of view or privilege one kind of 'culture' over another. Notions of absolutism wither in such a climate, and received systems of morality which operate on such notions are thus also open to challenge.

The traditional apocalyptic paradigm offers a means for making sense of radical discontinuity – by claiming crises are part of a deliberate and purposeful underlying design – as well as providing a moral vision. Says Zamora:

That the appeal of [Christ's] promise continues...2000 years after it was made and despite innumerable falsified predictions of the end, suggests the deep psychological needs to which it responds, as well as the flexibility of interpretation allowed by the form.
(Writing the Apocalypse 11)

If, therefore, one wants to make suppositions about why the creative imagination seems to have grasped onto the traditional paradigm at the very end of the twentieth century, one might posit that the psychological need for this sense-making structure has become somehow more acute, as has the desire for what Richard Cizik, the vice president for

governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, calls 'moral certitudes in a world without any certainties' (Cizik).¹⁹

Furthermore, the kind of social and psychological disruption described here almost certainly stimulates the socio-critical response. The adoption of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm as a critical stance against the current social order has its paradoxes since, as pointed out earlier, apocalyptic rhetoric assumes no rehabilitation is possible (of those who aren't among the saved) and '[emphasizes] that no social reform can cure the world's diseases. Every structure of the old world is infected and only an absolute, purifying cataclysm can make possible an utterly new, perfected world' (Berger 7). Yet what the apocalyptic paradigm allows is a recitation of all the things which are wrong with the present, all those things which, in the language of apocalypse, actually indicate that the world is beyond rehabilitation. Apocalypse does not propose to change these 'evils', merely to catalog them. But the very process of cataloguing is an inherent social critique. Zamora writes of the apocalypticist's 'dissenting perspective' and desire to create 'universal dramas that moralize judgments of isolated events and individual behavior':

Novelists who use apocalyptic elements, like the biblical apocalypticists, are often critical of present political, social, spiritual practices, and their fiction entertains the means to oppose and overcome them. (Writing the Apocalypse 3-4)

Perhaps, as Theodore L. Steinberg suggests, what is most surprising is not that authors use the apocalyptic paradigm, but that they so deftly 'manipulate that apparent apocalypticism to make vital observations about the world as it now exists (166). One conclusion we might

¹⁹ Cf. Wagar who attributes the contemporary eschatological interest to three kinds of modern anxiety: private/individual fear of death, isolation and separation; dread of natural forces; and anxiety over man's own destructive ability (66-7).

draw from this observation about contemporary apocalyptic is that the aim of its authors and artists may not be to re-work the paradigm at all, but rather to use it as the most appropriate vehicle for their social critique.

Apocalypse as a plot

It is appropriate here to return to Frank Kermode's concern with narrative endings.

Kermode reflects that plots and prophecy share the aim of conjuring the future from the present (83). Apocalyptic is, of course, a kind of prophecy, but it is also a kind of plot.

The directedness of apocalyptic narration is closely related to narrative plot. Like apocalypse, most plots may be described as a teleology of words or episodes, as comprehensible structures of action that are interrelated in a legible whole. Indeed, with its series of events in metonymic relation and its metaphoric, totalizing ending, apocalypse gives to history a coherence which can only be told, not experienced. It might thus be proposed as the very model of narrative plot....The biblical apocalypticist proposes nothing less than God's own plot for history – the only plot, he insists, in which by definition end and ending coincide. (Zamora, Writing the Apocalypse 13-14)

The teleology to which Zamora refers might also be thought of as sense-making.

Authors choose to depict one moment rather than another, describe one object rather than another, order scenes in one way rather than another, all in a drive toward an ending where these choices converge in some kind of meaning for the reader. A plot, then, may be thought of as a way of eliciting sense out of the chaotic material of life, just as organizing words in a particular order elicits meaning out of language. It is this sense of order which Kermode refers to when he talks of our need for endings so as to 'make possible a satisfying consonance with origins and with the middle' (17).

And of course apocalypse itself does have a plot. In 1979, the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project undertook to analyze all the literature which has been called apocalyptic and to determine what characteristics these works shared. The goal was to delineate the apocalyptic genre as precisely as possible, 'to give precision to the traditional category of "apocalyptic literature" by showing the extent and limits of conformity among the allegedly apocalyptic texts' (Collins 4). A unique group of narrative traits was isolated and the Society produced the following definition: 'a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world' (Collins 4).

Surprisingly, the elements of 'plot' which are traditionally considered to comprise apocalyptic narrative are not mentioned in this definition at all.²⁰ There is no mention of the motif of judgment, nor of the destructive aspect of the eschatological vision which is the result of this judgment. The use of 'otherworldly being' suggests a hesitance even about claiming that apocalyptic literature is a narrative whose crux is deity, a problematic stance in a definition which is looking specifically at biblical, rather than secular, apocalyptic stories. And yet even secular adaptations of the apocalyptic paradigm could be said to include motifs of destruction and catastrophe (if they are neo-apocalyptic) and renewal (if they are more traditional).

²⁰ This definition seems to me to be both too loose and too restrictive; it is too restrictive in the sense that it suggests that without the revelatory element a work cannot be considered apocalyptic, too loose in that it seems not to take into account some of the vital components of what has traditionally been understood as the story of Apocalypse. See Collins for more on this problematic definition.

Perhaps the cautiousness here is an acknowledgement of the extraordinary resiliency of the apocalyptic story. The flexibility with which authors have been able to reinterpret and adapt the elements of this story suggests why offering a restrictive definition would be problematic. The traditional story of apocalypse is fundamentally one in which God is the main character and judgment the main action. The result of the judgment is destruction of the old world on the one hand, and creation of a revitalized new world on the other. This general plot is discernible whether we examine the Christian apocalypse of John or more ancient, cyclical versions of cosmic destruction and renewal.²¹

Because the apocalyptic genre's roots are religious, secular authors face certain challenges in adapting it in their narratives. If apocalypse is, at heart, a narrative about a higher power correcting the moral imbalances of the world with God as the main 'character', how does one translate this tale into secular terms? What does New Jerusalem look like to modern eyes, for instance? Do we even still believe in notions of judgment and reward for the good? And what is the result when the story of apocalypse is removed from its theological setting?

Yet, often, secular adaptations of the traditional paradigm manage not only to retain the basic three themes of judgment, catastrophe and renewal, but also the more specific motifs of deity and New Jerusalem.²² The strategy that these writers have normally adopted is to re-conceive the elements of the original paradigm to fit a secular setting.

²¹ See Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of Eternal Return* for a discussion of these more ancient apocalyptic myths.

²² Other elements of the traditional paradigm, such as the figure of the apocalypticist, the battle of Armageddon or the Antichrist, are easily incorporated into secular adaptations because contemporary society has already become accustomed to using the rhetoric of apocalypse to describe real events. The word *Armageddon*, for instance, has often been used to describe armed conflicts of particularly large or violent kinds, while the number of tyrants, political figures, and malefactors who have been called or thought of as the Antichrist is too numerous to mention. See Robert Fuller for a more complete discussion of how the figure of the Antichrist has been co-opted for political and religious ends, particularly in America.

For example, the Judeo-Christian deity of the paradigm is replaced with an alternative deity-figure. Godlike qualities may be relocated into a human figure, one who holds literal or metaphoric powers to give or take life, or seems 'all-powerful' or omniscient in some other way. In Robert Coover's The Great Baseball Association, for example, it is the narrator, J. Henry Waugh, who takes on this deity role. Waugh has invented a fictional world of baseball teams and players which he controls with rolls of his dice, determining everything from batting averages to association politics and the details of each player's personal life.²³

Just as often, however, the alternative deity which secular writers create is based on some abstraction raised to the level of deity. This abstraction might be a specific object or idea, or it might be an ideology, thus reflecting Zamora's point that the apocalyptic genre is itself an ideological one.²⁴ In The Public Burning, Robert Coover's deity figure, a wild-eyed Uncle Sam, is a personification of American-ness. Don DeLillo, who is less interested in translating elements of the plot and more interested in the role of the apocalyptic in our everyday lives, nonetheless appears to cast the atomic bomb as a deity figure in his novel Underworld.

Another aspect of the traditional paradigm which has been translated by secular writers is the notion of 'world'.²⁵ Whereas science fiction writers may create actual worlds in their apocalyptic tales, mainstream writers often replace the real world with a figurative one. They may interpret 'world' to mean anything from the individual to a specific time

²³ Waugh's use of dice, however, implies an element of fate and luck which admittedly sits uneasily with the notion of deity. Perhaps Coover meant to juxtapose his narrative against Albert Einstein's famous quip that God does not play dice.

²⁴ Richard Slotkin argues that 'myth expresses ideology in a narrative, rather than a discursive or argumentative structure' (6)

²⁵ Not all of the novels mentioned here are of the traditional apocalyptic type; some more closely follow the neo-apocalyptic paradigm.

period. Both Nathanael West and Robert Coover substituted a specific community for their apocalyptic 'world' in The Day of the Locust (1939) and The Origin of the Brunists (1967).²⁶ Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, on the other hand, interpret 'world' to mean 'individual' or 'identity' in their respective apocalyptic novels Invisible Man (1952) and Native Son (1940), in which the black identity and/or body are the sites of destruction.

A third, narrower, interpretation is 'world' as the 'mind', an especially popular reading among contemporary film-makers. Films such as *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and *Donnie Darko* (2001) revolve around the tension between the perceived world of the narrator and the 'real' world of the film (and the destruction of one and creation of the other). Director/Screenwriter Terry Gilliam has a body of work including *Brazil* (1985) and *12 Monkeys* (1995) which suggests his fascination with this kind of apocalyptic scenario. Authors who write about madness often engage with this sort of apocalyptic sensibility and we might point to Doris Lessing's Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1971) and - depending on one's interpretation of the ending - Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho (1991) as examples.

Lastly, it is a common enough practice to adopt apocalyptic aspects in stories which deal with the passing of an era, that is, to interpret, as Frank Kermode and Douglas Robinson do, apocalypse as a period of transition.²⁷ Both William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936) and Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian (1985) frame specific time periods as 'worlds'. Both write about apocalypses of particular eras and ways of life which

²⁶ The Origin of the Brunists is probably more accurately assessed as a novel about millennialist fervor than general apocalypse, but as the concept of millennium is also part of apocalypse I include it here as an example.

²⁷ The eschatological connection to boundary is of obvious interest here, but one should note that not every story which deals with periods of transition would be apocalyptic (though the reverse would be true). Stories which look back in nostalgia to an earlier time suggest an interest in degeneration rather than regeneration since they pit a glorified past against a degenerate present. The apocalyptic sensibility moves in the opposite direction: from a degenerate time to purified one.

are ended and replaced with newer, better ones. In the case of Absalom, Absalom! this is the age of slavery in the American South. For McCarthy, it is the bloodthirsty era of conquering the American West.²⁸

Of all the original apocalyptic concepts, New Jerusalem is perhaps the most difficult to translate into secular terms, particularly since it is often confused with ideas of utopia.²⁹ But utopia is a 'human construct', a vision of a political, moral and inclusive community created by humans (John Carey xi). New Jerusalem is outside of ideas of politics and human community; it is a gift from God, an elitist and *divisive* one which separates the sinners from the faithful forever, and one which cannot be gotten or created in any other way.³⁰ In the original paradigm, New Jerusalem is a literal place which is inherited by the faithful, but secular writers have been uneasy about trying to envision such a space. Many have found a solution in the fact that, while the prophet John is told that New Jerusalem will be a literal place, a new heaven on earth, what he really experiences is a *vision* of this idealized and perfected place. For many writers, this has become the key to translating the difficult concept. In contemporary, secular apocalyptic tales, New Jerusalem is less a place, than a new way of seeing: a new vision. Characters do not inherit a new world. Often, they

²⁸ See Rosen for more on McCarthy.

²⁹ There seems to be some basis for the belief that women writers are far more attracted to the utopian/dystopian motif than the apocalyptic one. With the exception of Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear it Away, one would be hard-pressed to identify many female-written apocalyptic narratives of the past century. On the other hand, one could identify numerous examples of dystopian fictions by women such as Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Marge Piercy.

³⁰ Zamora distinguishes between New Jerusalem and the 'return to Eden' motif, saying that the former completes history whereas the latter is based on 'undoing of historical experience'. 'If *innocence* inhabits Eden,' she writes, 'it is *virtue* which gains New Jerusalem' (Writing the Apocalypse 18). However, this opposition is itself not absolute – Vonnegut's New Jerusalem in Galápagos, for example, is distinctly Edenic.

inherit a new way of understanding the old world. And this new way of understanding allows them to see the old world *anew*.³¹

Effects of translation

There are three areas of the original apocalyptic paradigm which are tangibly affected by adaptation into secular works, and, as one might suspect, all three are to do with the absolutist point of view of the traditional story.

The first of these is how deity is portrayed in these recent re-workings. One finds a 'humanization', if you will, of the deity. Nietzsche's dictum that God is dead is perhaps not taken as gospel in the newer tales, but He may no longer be the perfect entity of the Biblical version. These secular deities are often imperfect characters, neither absolutely omniscient and omnipotent, nor absolutely benevolent. The absolutist Judeo-Christian depiction of God ceases to be a factor; plurality and ambiguity are stronger influences here.

As a result, writers often create more than one deity for their stories. Sometimes they split the 'traits' of God between these characters, emphasizing the Judeo-Christian God's forgiving side in one character and His wrathful side in another. Sometimes authors conflate the usually separate Book of Revelation roles of Saviour and Antichrist into one deity figure who is subject to the very moral ambivalence that traditional apocalypse is held to shun.

Where the concept of apocalyptic deity is located in a person (rather than an abstraction), we tend to find an interest in exploring the question of what it means to *be* a god. We find humanized portraits of the deity in which His point of view is considered.

³¹ This is why Joseph Dewey stresses the atomic bomb in his reading of apocalyptic literature. It is his perception, and mine as well, that Hiroshima destroyed an old 'way of thinking, a way of perceiving the world, a way of perceiving ourselves' and ushered in a new way of seeing the world (*In a Dark Age* 235).

A second area affected by translation is the conception of time. The apocalyptic conception of time is inherently a complicated one, for the story of apocalypse is simultaneously about the ending of everything and yet suggests a time afterwards. It 'mocks the notion of conclusive ends and endings even as it proposes just that – the conclusive narration of history's end' (Zamora, Writing the Apocalypse 17). On a more local level of narrative, St. John occupies two times simultaneously since he is both in the present being shown the future and in the future experiencing it. There is a tension therefore between Time as a principle (an overall structure of individual moments) and time as a narrative concept (a method of juxtaposing different moments in a story). In Christian apocalypse, the overall structure of time is linear, but St. John's viewing of it is not: through his vision he occupies more than one place on the continuum of that line simultaneously. While malleability of *visionary* time is a distinguishing trait of traditional apocalyptic narrative, it is distinct from the issue of the structure of Time overall. Despite these complexities, apocalypse is based on a linear notion of time and is a story about the End of history.

What we find in the contemporary versions of apocalypse, however, is that the story about the End of Time becomes instead a story about the end of one time. This marks a return to a view of time which is cyclical rather than linear, and which is more akin to that of the end-of-cosmos stories found in ancient cultures. It marks a movement away from the Judeo-Christian notion of linear time with a beginning, middle and end. In this shift one can see again how absolutism is abandoned in favor of a more flexible interpretation: endings become beginnings and vice versa.

Moreover, *absolute* beginnings and endings disappear. Mircea Eliade notes that most eschatologies hold a common belief that only absolute destruction of the old world can

result in absolute renewal (Myth and Reality 51-2). What is played out more often in contemporary versions is a partial destruction, a surgical strike of sorts, with the result that there occurs a blurring of beginnings and endings, a logical outcome of depicting New Jerusalem as a changed point of view, rather than a whole new literal world. Contemporary writers who revise the apocalyptic paradigm to reflect a cyclical rather than linear scheme may be responding to a modern sense of skepticism about the singularity of events. In conjunction with the numerous falsified predicted apocalypses to which people are exposed, a contemporary writer of apocalyptic narrative might find that a cyclical view of time seems a better match than a linear view based on singularity.³²

The third feature affected by translation is the concept of judgment. Judgment often becomes an amorphous and ambiguous concept in the contemporary versions. In part this is a result of imperfect deities. These reconceived deities are often soul-searching, Hamlet-like characters. Unlike the God of the Bible, their moral bearings are sometimes unsteady. They are fully aware of, sometimes even paralyzed by, the moral complexities of the modern world, and they are frequently unsure what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. Questions arise as to whether judgment is possible, who has the right to judge, and against what standard. In contemporary re-workings, the issue of judgment is often tied to a point of view, and if the godhead has been split among characters, the judgment will probably be different for each character.

One notes that while artists' handling of the thematic elements of apocalypse may vary widely, the handling of the translation of apocalyptic form is, by necessity, a commonality between them. Apocalypse is not just the story of a vision, it is *told* in a vision. It has a visionary format. Authors who work with the apocalyptic paradigm may choose not

³² See Kermode for more on the effect of disproven apocalyptic prediction.

to deal with this element in their narratives, but by virtue of the fact that there is a formal translation from a visionary form to speculative and imaginative texts such as novels or films, they, in fact, maintain a sense of this visionary format. One way to think about the secular adaptation of apocalypse would be to locate its formal translation from visionary to creative texts such as the ones discussed here.

Not all authors and film-makers incorporate all of these conceptual shifts in the same way or at the same time. Depending on what themes an author is working with, different elements of the apocalyptic paradigm may be emphasized or de-emphasized. Different artists also arrive at different solutions for translating a theological story into a secular one, and because of this the implications for the paradigm may also shift slightly.

Chapter synopses

The following study examines five different authors and artists working in three different mediums: literature, film and the graphic novel. I have divided the study evenly between the literary and visual media in part because the story of apocalypse has, almost from its inception, been represented by multiple genres. It is perhaps the most illustrated of all the Biblical books and has inspired countless images and works of art. (Appendix B) It is to be expected that the choice of medium has implications for the representation of the apocalyptic paradigm, but I wish to emphasize at the outset that this study is not primarily intended as an examination of genre. Although I am interested in how different genres represent the apocalyptic paradigm (for example, the handling of time in the graphic novel),

my main focus is on exploring how these artists make use of the story of apocalypse within their chosen genre.

The authors and artists represented here were chosen first of all because they each have a history of exploring the idea of apocalypse. In all cases, one can find a number of texts in each of their *oeuvres* that might be identified as apocalyptic. The texts which I have chosen to examine are the examples from these authors' careers which are in the mode of the traditional apocalyptic rather than neo-apocalyptic paradigm. Kurt Vonnegut's body of work, for example, also includes neo-apocalyptic texts, but it is the intent of this study to examine only those texts which align themselves with traditional apocalyptic, to examine how these texts translate a religious paradigm to a secular milieu and to think about what each author gains from choosing to work with the classic rather than new paradigm.

The word *choosing* need not imply conscious design. While the existence of more than one 'apocalyptic' text in these authors' *oeuvres* argues for the idea that they may indeed be making a conscious choice, it is not necessarily the case that they are. Apocalypse is an idea embedded in the social consciousness and in the post-Hiroshima world the eschatological tenor of events has throbbed steadily in the background of our daily lives, even when we are not conscious of it. Authors who write apocalyptic texts may not be under a direct influence so much as reflecting something which is in the background of our conscious lives.

Secondly, the texts represented here were all created within the same twenty year period which ends the twentieth century, and thus may tell us something more general about the artistic engagement with the apocalyptic paradigm as the century drew to a close. Because in some cases during this time period, we find authors like Kurt Vonnegut who

previously produced works more reflective of the neo-apocalyptic paradigm suddenly creating texts which return to the traditional paradigm, it seems worthwhile to examine various apocalyptic narratives of the same period, particularly in the light of their closeness to the year 2000, to question whether and how the use of the paradigm might be reflecting other concerns of the period. If apocalypse is 'a symbol of time which articulates a people's experience of their being-in-the-world' (Bergoffen 11), this grouping of apocalyptic texts may be able to tell us something about the experience of 'being-in-the-world' at the end of the twentieth century.

A more arguable commonality of the authors and artists I've chosen to examine here is their status as postmodern writers. While it is not the aim of this study to specifically view these texts through the lens of postmodernism, an awareness of the fact that all of these texts reflect narrative traits which we have come to call 'postmodern' can be useful nonetheless, if for no other reason than it might be part of the author's experience of 'being-in-the-world'. Each of the authors or film-makers here has been identified by critics as postmodern, though not always for the same reasons. The Wachowski Brothers, for example, mix high and low culture in their *Matrix* films, self-consciously making pastiches of iconic scenes from many genres: the Western show-down, the martial arts face-off, the philosophical teacher/pupil scene. Don DeLillo, on the other hand, is widely regarded as postmodern because of, amongst other things, his preoccupation with language, reflected both in the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in his works, and continuing interest in motifs of information dissemination, media and advertising in a consumer capitalism, and art. Some of these writers adopt a more deliberate postmodern sensibility than others, but as a group whose

members have all been dubbed postmodern, their adaptations of the apocalyptic paradigm may reflect how a particular kind of creative voice approaches the story of apocalypse.

While I examine written and visual media here, the organization of the study is not along those lines. Instead, I have chosen a continuum of apocalyptic approaches in organizing the chapters. That is, while Alan Moore and the Wachowski Brothers both work in visual media their approaches to the material and paradigm indicate different interests. Thus, the movement is from the texts that deliberately flaunt their use of the paradigm to those which apply the paradigm more metaphysically. The line of division is by authors who use the apocalyptic paradigm to explore other themes and authors whose theme is the exploration of the apocalyptic paradigm.

Chapter One examines texts by Alan Moore, whose work in the comic book genre has made him perhaps the best known writer in that field. As the production of a comic book is usually a collaborative effort between a writer and artist, the question arises whether one can properly consider a single person as the author of a comic work. Levels of collaboration vary remarkably between different people in the field. Some writers provide only the dialogue and description of action and leave all the illustration to their artist, while others discuss panel illustration beforehand.

Within the industry, Moore is known for the unusually large amount of detail he provides to his illustrators as to how many panels a page should have, the layout, the detail within them, and so forth.³³ (Appendix C) Because Moore tends to conceive his stories in

³³ Moore's colleague, artist Todd Klein, writes that 'Alan's scripts have been notorious for their great length and detail, but what makes up that detail? Plenty of description, sure, but beyond that, Alan brings everyone reading his scripts into his personal world and vision of the story, not only describing every detail he can think of, but reaching out to you, asking you to join him in collaboration' (Khoury 190).

visual terms and gives this instruction to his artists as part of his scripts, I am satisfied to refer to these works as 'his,' though this in no way discounts the role which artists such as Dave Gibbons, Stephen Bissette, and John Totleben have all played in realizing and contributing to Moore's stories. Moore's use of the apocalyptic paradigm in Swamp Thing and Watchmen is deliberate. Both works clearly identify their plots as versions of apocalypse and in both it is clear that the author is using the paradigm in its socio-critical function. While I begin with Moore on the argument that his texts are the most obviously apocalyptic, there is a more subtle use of the paradigm at work in his texts, for Moore uses the paradigm to critique not just the ills of society but also elements of the paradigm itself.

Swamp Thing is a veritable collection of apocalyptic stories, exploring the numerous ways in which the paradigm has been adopted. There are personal apocalypses and communal ones, fictional apocalypses and 'real' apocalypses. Even the Swamp Thing creature is himself conceived of as a symbolic representation of apocalyptic ideas, being a walking personification of the kind of 'vegetation myth' which Carl B. Yoke identifies as one of the category of re-creation or end-of-the-world myths (3).

In Swamp Thing's refusal to absolutely destroy the old world as well as in its emphasis on cyclical time, Moore's work here shares another trait in common with such 'vegetation myths': what Eliade identifies as a 'moveable origin', an origin 'no longer found only in a mythical past but also in a fabulous future' (Myth and Reality 52). Moore takes advantage of the apocalyptic paradigm's socio-critical function not merely to criticize society on a local level, as he does in issues which deal with slavery, misogyny, and gun violence, for instance, but also to examine some of the thornier issues of the paradigm itself: the nature of New Jerusalem and the problem of evil.

Watchmen also takes on some of these larger issues, though not the same ones.

Structured as a traditional mystery, the apocalyptic plot is not immediately revealed in Watchmen. Or rather, Moore depicts a world grown comfortably used to the apocalyptic sensibilities which are so much a part of our daily backdrop, only to reveal that there is a real apocalyptic plot after all. In doing so, Moore forces a consideration of the real apocalypticism with which we live by positing a 'What if' scenario which takes advantage of and extrapolates from those real fears.

Aside from this critique of the political eschatological impulse which has led the world to the edge of nuclear confrontation, Moore again uses his text to ponder an element of the paradigm itself: the personage of the deity. Watchmen occupies itself with questions about God, about our conception of the deity and God's perception of us. Moore uses the apocalyptic framework of impending End to catalyze his deity characters, using their responses to examine the various depictions of deity and to humanize them.

Kurt Vonnegut, on the other hand, does not want to humanize deity at all. On the contrary, human beings practically become an incidental part of a larger story in his apocalyptic tale Galápagos in which Natural Selection is depicted as the deity. An avowed atheist and also a member of what Frank David Kievitt argues is a generation of (science fiction) writers who began to 'wonder if the faith they had placed in science and technology was misplaced' after the disillusioning use of both in World War Two (170), Vonnegut uses the apocalyptic paradigm to criticize 'the big brain' that makes such technology and wars possible. Like another science fiction writer, Margaret Atwood, who has written that understanding the creative imagination has become a necessity 'because increasingly, if we can imagine something we'll be able to do it' (*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in

Context' 517), Vonnegut sees potential danger in imagination unbounded by a system of morality.³⁴

In Galápagos, the author finds a way to unite ideas of religion and science by making literal the idea that science has become our religion. I suggest in Chapter Two that Vonnegut explores the sense-making potential of what he sees as two of the grand narratives of our time: apocalypse and Darwinism. By elevating Evolution, a driving principle of the natural sciences, to the position of deity in his novel, he not only finds a way to reconcile two sense-making paradigms which have always stood in opposition to one another, he also finds a means to criticize both systems of sense-making.

His adaptation of evolution into an apocalyptic framework means that Vonnegut is able to provide a satisfactory answer to one of religion's most difficult quandaries: why suffering exists. Catholic historian Jean Delumeau has commented that 'for as long as we are living in time, we are not able to understand the reason for the colossal enigma of...suffering' (David 53), but Vonnegut suggests that if we lived for a *long enough time* we might, and that what we would discover is that it was nothing personal; it was just another bump along the continuum of human evolution. Vonnegut uses the extreme length of time needed for evolution to illustrate how 'the total view of history hopefully affords sufficient distance from the crisis at hand to permit the believer to discover God's will for the present as well as the overall meaning of human existence' (May 13). In uniting evolutionary and apocalyptic time the author is able to '[provide] a "logical" solution to a theological dilemma' and also '[enable] the believer to redefine any *apparent* evil or calamity as a positive good by situating it within the temporal frame of mythic narrative', something which Stephen D. O'Leary argues is the point of the apocalyptic paradigm (42).

³⁴ This is a return to Romantic fears of technology and science embodied in Frankenstein.

As I show in Chapter Three, evolution is an important trope in the Wachowski Brothers' *Matrix* movies, as well. What at first appears to be a rather straightforward re-working of the story of Christ's resurrection becomes far more complicated as the trilogy progresses. In fact, one way to read the trilogy is as a story in which apocalypse itself evolves, and it is in this chapter that I will examine how a deliberately postmodern style of story-telling becomes a vital part of the overall work.

Film is a particularly suitable vehicle for apocalyptic narratives. The simple fact of its being a visual medium means the viewer shares an affinity with St. John, the visionary who *sees* the apocalypse spread out before him in Revelation. Combined with film's ability to manipulate time and place this suggests a particularly apt means of conveying the story of apocalypse. That *The Matrix* trilogy is founded on this idea of seeing means that it intersects with the apocalyptic paradigm in an unique way, particularly since film mimics the ordering process of apocalyptic time through its own meaningful arrangements of images. *The Matrix* is thematically concerned with epistemology, but rather than use the apocalyptic paradigm to speak about their theme the brothers use their theme to speak to the apocalyptic paradigm. Hence, each of their films 'sees' apocalypse through a different point of view.

The films are also part of a different apocalyptic tradition, one described by M.H. Abrams when he argued that the Romantics re-channeled their literal apocalyptic hopes of the 'regeneration of mankind' and 'renovation of the earth' into a more metaphoric one of an 'apocalypse of imagination' after their disillusionment with the French Revolution. Because *The Matrix* is about a revolution, too, it taps into this Romantic interpretation of apocalypse. Moreover, it intersects with the Romantic 'apocalypse of the mind' in a quite literal way

through the ‘jacking in’ of minds to a larger matrix, as well as with its overall concern about perception.

Don DeLillo, the author I discuss in Chapter Four, is interested in a different kind of perception. DeLillo has written a number of novels which investigate different aspects of apocalypticism, but it is in Underworld that he addresses the topic most directly through the lens of nuclear fear. Like Vonnegut, who posits a new religion based on science, DeLillo also builds his novel around a religious sensibility, only the religion which he uses is nuclearism, the religion of nuclear weapons. Recognizing that the atomic bomb ‘has completed the process of secularization that apocalyptic thinking has undergone since medieval time’ (Ketterer 94), DeLillo locates the site of nuclearism, not at Hiroshima, but at the moment when nuclear confrontation seemed inevitable: the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Of all the authors examined in this study, DeLillo is the least interested in the specific plot of apocalypse or its translation into a secular literature. Instead, his interest in Underworld (as in his other apocalyptic work) is in how the apocalypse affects us. DeLillo’s work is an example of what Joseph Dewey argues is the American novel’s exploration ‘into how people could adjust to life in the thick penumbra of the mushroom cloud, how we could begin to think about the unthinkable’ (In a Dark Time 9).

This question of the ‘unthinkable’ is addressed by DeLillo in his novels End Zone and, less specifically, White Noise where the topic is largely re-framed as one of the ‘indescribable’.³⁵ Language is a recurring theme in DeLillo’s work and in his apocalyptic novels he wonders, as one linguistic specialist did in 1965, whether in the atomic bomb it is ‘possible that in spite of our vast and ever-growing vocabulary we have finally created an

³⁵ Lois Parkinson Zamora notes how apocalypse not only presents ‘a model of historical desire but also of linguistic desire’ (Writing the Apocalypse 16).

object that transcends all possible description' (Boyer 250). Aware that the bomb was, and is, 'a power that defied the military and political vocabulary that first tried to encompass it', the paradox of the existence of the bomb and our simultaneous inability to adequately discuss it leads to some of the funniest scenes in these two works (Dewey, In a Dark Time 5).³⁶

But in Underworld, DeLillo extends his exploration of language to the apocalyptic sensibility overall. Recognizing in the bomb a force which 'demands not only an entirely new vocabulary, but a new way of thinking,' DeLillo examines this new way of thinking, taking in topics as varied as our perverse desire for punishment, the sense-making potential of the paradigm, and the effect of failed apocalyptic prediction (Dewey, In a Dark Time 4).

The final chapter returns to the idea of apocalypse as plot and examines the paradoxical stance of the author in these works as both prophet and apocalypticist. While all apocalypticists are prophets, not all prophets are apocalypticists, who are specifically prophets of the End. Apocalyptic writing is a particular offshoot of prophecy, and the difference between the two lies primarily in their visions of history and mankind's role in it.

Whereas a prophet admonishes sinful behavior and threatens punishment by God if the perpetrator (or community) does not correct his faithless ways, an apocalypticist promises God's final intervention regardless. The future which a prophet predicts is a possible future, one which may occur if mankind does not act correctly. Such a vision, as Martin Buber noted, is one of a partnership between God and mankind, one with 'God and man working out together the future of the world' (qtd. in May 14).

³⁶ DeLillo's acknowledgment of the comedy that arises out of apocalypticism is echoed in Robert Coover's apocalyptic work. Coover's tone is more Juvenalian than his peer's Horatian one. See Lewicki 60-66 for more.

An apocalyptist, on the other hand, sees God's behavior as fixed; God *will* intervene and bring human history to an end. Apocalyptists warn of an un-alterable End. Their aim is to comfort and prepare those who are already 'saved'. There is nothing that mankind, even the righteous, can do to avoid this ending. About this, apocalyptists are unequivocal. The pious must stand fast, maintain faith, and bear up under tribulations. The reward will come later, after this horrible period of time, but while on earth, there is nothing which the faithful can do to alter the end which God has planned; all they can do is endure it.

Debra Bergoffen ties the difference to the idea of Covenant, writing that in prophecy:

[God] sets the teleological course of history but needs human beings, whose choices He does not control, to create the conditions which allow the teleological process to occur...God promises to reward moral behavior by implementing the Messianic Age, but the people must choose whether or not to be moral. God cannot guarantee human righteousness. From the prophetic perspective, the divine promise is the revelation of a possible future, not a necessary one. (21)

'The apocalyptists,' she notes, 'are decided that the goodness of God lies, not in His leaving the human choice of history open, but in His determining the speedy end to the evils of history and the imminent beginning of the Messianic Age' (25). Thus the timbre of these two kinds of types of prophecy are quite different. Prophecy, as Buber and Alter suggest, is interventionist as regards history; it counsels engagement with the world and emphasizes the power to change the future. Apocalyptic is more passive, crying jeremiad-like that the End is approaching and that God's house will be put in order in spite of man's interference.

And yet authors who adopt the apocalyptic paradigm in their own work simultaneously adopt both kinds of prophetic voices. In the context of their works, the adoption of the traditional paradigm suggests an irrevocable interruption of history which

men are powerless to affect. However, in the context of the author/audience relationship and because of the paradigm's socio-critical function, the author's stance is a more active, prophetic one, detailing social ills in what can only be interpreted as an attempt to change human behavior. Outside the context of their apocalyptic plots, then, authors become what Kurt Vonnegut calls 'agents of change': 'specialized cells in a social organism' who are 'responding symbolically to life' (Vonnegut, Wampeters 213).

In the conclusion I will take a closer look at this paradoxical narrative position, as well as describe the manifestations of some other paradoxes in contemporary re-workings of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. Lastly, I will try to draw some conclusions based on the commonalities of the texts examined here.

Sentient Vegetable Claims End is Near! The Comics of Alan Moore

Alan Moore's recent fiftieth birthday was greeted with accolades from both his fans and his peers. Fellow writers, former editors, and artists who had illustrated his work came together to express their admiration in two laudatory volumes: Alan Moore – Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman and The Extraordinary Work of Alan Moore. Many of his old comic book stories were collected and reissued in time for the occasion. Even so, Moore's name remains largely unrecognized in the literary world.

This lack of recognition is starting to change, however. Graphic novels are finding their way onto the syllabi of university courses; movies based on comic book characters are bridging the traditional gap between the fan-based readership, comprised mainly of teenage boys,¹ and the wider popular culture; and booksellers such as Waterstones and Borders are beginning to devote whole sections of their shelf space to selling the comics that DC and Marvel are reissuing in the more palatable graphic novel format. These booksellers are beginning to realize what DC and Marvel have known for years: that the business of comic books is a lucrative one and anyone who can tap into the mainstream marketplace can potentially reap large financial rewards.²

As the titles of the tribute volumes suggest, in his field Moore is regarded as an innovator, as well as a clever and imaginative storyteller. Michael Moorcock notes how

¹ While true in the U.S. and U.K., the readership of comics in other countries such as France (where comics are called bandes-dessinées) or Japan (where they are called manga) is far less age and gender-restricted.

² In 1997, comic book sales amounted to \$425 million. This was significantly down, however, from a peak in 1993 of \$850 million. The recent reissuing of comics in graphic novel form appears to be a marketing strategy meant to reach a reading public who have largely remained unaware of a gigantic subculture thriving amongst them (McAllister 17).

Moore 'has remained uncomfortably original, temperamentally unable to rest on his laurels or exploit his early dynamic' (smoky man 52), while Dylan Horrocks proposes that what makes his work unusual is Moore's 'ability to take a trashy formula or forgettable character and shape them into something fresh, profound and beautiful – while at the same time managing to impart a genuinely respectful sense of what was precious about the original' (smoky man 75). His skill at discerning the possibilities for characters and even genres has meant that some of his work has been ground-breaking, while at the same time the breadth of this autodidact's own reading has allowed him to make connections in his stories more often thought of as 'literary' than 'comic-like'.

This chapter examines how two of Moore's apocalyptic works, Swamp Thing and Watchmen, adapt the traditional paradigm, and how this adaptation functions both to allow Moore a framework in which to address topics of concern to him and to explore the subject of apocalypse itself.³ But Moore's 'framework' is formal as well as thematic. We need to take account of the medium itself, its aptness as a vehicle of apocalyptic storytelling, and Moore's shrewd and imaginative discernment of its possibilities.

Visual media such as comic books and film are particularly apt vehicles for apocalyptic narratives. In part this may be because the story of Apocalypse is such a visual one. As previously noted, the Book of Revelation is perhaps the most visually-oriented of all the biblical books.⁴ Much of its power derives from its compelling descriptions of the Four Horsemen, the Whore of Babylon, the throne of Christ, New Jerusalem, and the many

³ Moore's recently concluded series Promethea is also overtly apocalyptic, but concluded too late to be included in this study.

⁴ It is one of the most illustrated of the biblical books taken as a whole, and continues to be re-interpreted by artists, an attestation to its powers of inspiration and the flexibility of its symbols. In 1999, the British Museum held an exhibition 'The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come' which drew together visual apocalyptic works stretching from medieval manuscripts through to modern and contemporary artists such as Max Beckman and Jake and Dinos Chapman, and film-maker Ingmar Bergman.

plagues visited upon mankind. Visual renditions of the story, then, are a sensible extrapolation of this visually-oriented Biblical book.

There is a second reason why the comic book in particular may be uniquely adapted for re-workings of the apocalyptic story, and this is because of its special ability to manipulate time and place within the reading experience. One of the distinctive characteristics of Revelation is its sense of time. It is simultaneously present and in the future. John is both in the present being shown a vision of the future and in the future observing it as the present. This elasticity of time within Revelation can be bewildering for an audience used to chronological story-telling. Yet this elasticity of time (and of place) has always been an inherent element of the comic book genre.

While fiction is also capable of scrambling time and location,⁵ and modern audiences have learned to read through these dislocations and understand the story in spite of them, the manipulation of sequentiality and location in fiction is, for the most part, a Modernist experiment, one which comprises a subset of narratives in the overall history of the novel.⁶

Yet the issue of sequentiality of narrative has always been a central one for comic book artists and writers. The manipulation of time and place is a defining trait of the comic book, and because of this one might argue that the comic book form is a particularly apt match for the apocalyptic story with its dislocated sense of time and place.

Comic book artist/writer Will Eisner defines comics as 'sequential art', thereby

⁵ One might point to Conrad, Faulkner or Burroughs to name only three who have experimented with these ideas in their fiction. Filmmakers, too, almost from the beginning have experimented with these ideas.

⁶ As comics are a 20th century phenomenon with a genesis usually traced to the 1930s, however, one might argue that the comic book is also a Modernist form.

stressing exactly how vital a role time plays in the comic form.⁷ Yet Eisner does not mean a sequential or chronological narrative when he uses this term. He means a sequence of images linked by juxtaposition, rather than chronological order.⁸

In his book Understanding Comics, comic artist Scott McCloud analyzes the elasticity of time which is a unique result of how comic images are laid out in proximity to one another. When two images, or panels as they are called, are laid next to one another, the space between them is called 'the gutter' and it is here, McCloud notes, that both time and place are uniquely manipulated through a concept he calls 'closure'.⁹ Closure happens when the reader fills in the missing bits that occur *between* panels. In the 'blank' space of the gutter, a reader does not merely fill in the action linking a movement which is started in the first panel and completed in the second, as they do between frames of film. How a reader fills in the gutter is dependent upon what the two panels actually show. McCloud explains:

Comic panels fracture time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar. (67)

McCloud illustrates his point with two panels, the first of a character holding an upraised axe over a second person and saying, 'Now you die!' and the second of the night sky and the word 'EEYAA!' (Appendix D, Fig. 1) Unlike in television where the viewer is

⁷ Eisner, who died in 2004 aged 87, was a major developer of the comic book medium and innovator in the way comic art was drawn. His detective comic *The Spirit* is almost always mentioned by comic book artists when asked about their influences. He was also the first to write seriously about the theory behind comic book illustration in Comics and Sequential Art.

⁸ Though many in the comic industry would insist that comics are a distinct medium from film, this definition of sequential art implies an affinity with 'montage' technique of early film.

⁹ McCloud uses the term 'closure' differently than it is used in narratology. His ideas on closure have also been challenged. *The Comic Journal* devoted an entire issue (211) to debating his ideas in April, 1999.

told what to ‘imagine’, McCloud points out that the reader is an active partner in the closure of this sequence.

I may have drawn an *axe* being *raised* in this example, but I’m not the one who let it *drop* or decided how *hard* the blow, or *who* screamed, or *why*. *That*, dear reader, was *your special crime*, each of you committing it in your own *style*. All of you *participated* in the murder. All of you *held the axe* and *chose your spot*....the reader’s *deliberate, voluntary closure* is comics’ *primary* means of simulating *time and motion*. (68-9, emphasis McCloud’s)

But closure is not merely a means of filling in missing motion. It is far more complicated than that. McCloud cites six kinds of closure that occur in the gutter spaces of comics, each requiring a different level of reader participation.¹⁰

The first of these, Moment-to-Moment, is very simple and requires little participation since time is literally being portrayed as immediate and chronological. The second is Subject-to-Subject closure, as in the axe murder example. Subject-to-Subject closure requires more viewer participation because it asks the reader to make the transition or connection between the images with the understanding that he is staying within the same scene or idea. The third is Action-to-Action and requires the reader to fill in the ensuing action, as when a first panel shows a baseball batter at bat and the second shows the ball flying through the air. The fourth is Scene-to-Scene and requires deductive reasoning to make sense of the ‘transitions, which transport us across significant distances of time and space’ (71). The fifth is Aspect-to-Aspect which ‘bypasses time for the most part and sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea or mood’ (72). And the final type of closure is what McCloud calls the Non-sequitur ‘which offers no logical relationship

¹⁰ McCloud’s analysis applies mostly to images in a straight sequence. He does not analyze ‘exploded’ images, for instance, or images which bleed into one another. At least, he does not analyze them in terms of closure. He does address such images as part of his chapter on panel borders and their implications.

between panels whatsoever', though he does suggest that by laying images side-by-side one forces some kind of relationship between the two to develop (72-3).

McCloud argues that it is the collaboration between creator and reader that happens in the gutter space which makes comics a unique art form, with a unique relationship to time and place. Panels or frames

have no *fixed* or *absolute meaning*, like the icons of *language*....Nor is their meaning as *fluid* and *malleable* as the sorts of icons we call *pictures*. The panel acts as a *general indicator* that time or space is being divided. The *durations* of that time and the *dimensions* of that space are defined more by the *contents* of the panel than by the panel itself....In learning to read comics we all learned to perceive time *spatially*, for in the world of comics, *time and space are one and the same*.
(99-100, emphasis McCloud's)

By its very nature, the narrative style of the comic book has a strong affinity with that of the Book of Revelation in terms of its manipulation of time and place. Revelation exhibits something very similar to this 'closure' of time: John can witness the entirety of an event in a single vision, though the event itself may take place over a space of days or months as it does, for example, in Rev. 11.7-12 where John simultaneously observes the two prophesying witnesses die, lie dead in the streets of the great city for three and a half days, and then resurrected and taken up to heaven.¹¹ The sudden movement from locale to locale in comics is also a feature of Revelation, as in Rev. 4.1-2 where John is simultaneously on Patmos receiving his vision and taken up to heaven where he observes the future, or in Rev. 13.1 where John is suddenly moved from heaven to stand 'upon the sand of the sea'.

¹¹ Much of the disruption of time and the sense of simultaneity in Revelation is implied through the use of verb tenses. Thus, the passage alluded to here begins in a future tense, 'And their dead bodies *shall lie* in the street of the great city', and concludes in a past tense, 'And after three days and an half the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet'.

An exemplary instance of this kind of temporal and spatial disruption in comic books occurs in Issue #37 of Swamp Thing, 'Growth Patterns'.¹² The issue introduces us to John Constantine who is visiting associates around the world while Swamp Thing is re-growing his body for the first time. The scene in which Constantine's friend Emma is killed shows exactly how complicated closure can get and how these complications resemble the future/past and here/there confluences of Revelation-time. (Appendix D, Fig. 2)

In this scene, the reader is simultaneously in the swamp with Constantine and Swamp Thing, and in New York where Emma is about to open her closet door and find something nasty waiting inside for her (The Curse 69). At the moment she discovers this creature, the reader is simultaneously transported to London, Chicago, and Washington where each of Constantine's associates psychically reacts to Emma's discovery. The following images show Emma chased to her death while simultaneously they relate each associate's response to her death in their disparate locations (The Curse 70-72).¹³

Throughout the scene, the dialogue of different characters 'overlaps' to refer not just to the panel in which that character occurs, but also to the events in a second, or even third, panel, as well. In this sequence, closure is very intense and rapid, transporting the reader in time and distance in much the same way as John is transported in Revelation.¹⁴

¹² Swamp Thing citations will refer to the graphic novel in which they appear, followed by page number of the graphic novel, and not the individual issue.

¹³ Notably, this particular scene is *about* a revelation which each of the associates has regarding Emma's death.

¹⁴ Design plays an equally important part in conveying both meaning and pace here. The start of the sequence on p. 70 is in long vertical panels. The following page 'interrupts' the stability of that design by intruding with horizontal panels that tilt away off the page. The effect is three-fold: first, the sudden eruption into long horizontal panels from vertical ones conveys a sense of fleeing from the danger; secondly, the tilting of these panels downward as with gravity is appropriate for the fall out the window; and thirdly, the tilted design implies a world gone askew. Moreover, these panels irrupt into one another and arguably deny a reader a clear central focus, a design element which speeds the pace along by forcing the eye to move faster over a seemingly less organized collection of images. On the final page, the confusion seems total, with equal weight given each image in the 'shattered' view. The reader has no clear sense of which 'direction' to read these images or to which to give precedence, a confusion compounded by the fact that the design element of the 'shards' *should* be pointing to the dead Emma to emphasize her death, but instead point at a space above her head in a kind of empty gesture.

A different, but no less complex, type of closure occurs in the same issue on Day twelve of Swamp Thing's re-growth (62) (Appendix D, Fig. 3). When all the panels of this page are put together they form an image of Swamp Thing's head, but individually each panel is a psychedelic swathe, completely unintelligible outside the combination of frames. Even within the completed whole, time and space are fractured. The top-middle section of the image has a background of forest and sunset, while the bottom-middle blends away into blackness and the hint of roots. The effect, if our eye only moves vertically along this line, is of vegetation, its roots planted deep in soil, growing up towards the sun. However, along the horizontal axis of this central image, the background is an unnatural shade of orange with no hint given of where the image is taking place.

The four corner pieces, on the other hand, with their psychedelic swirls, are set against light blue backgrounds. The bottom two images, in particular, have the suggestion of water bubbles, and the green swathes are made up of tiny circles which suggest algae. This pattern of green is different again from the green swathe of the middle-top image which resembles the soft moss or grass of a forest floor. The focus of the narration on this page is Swamp Thing's musing about what he is:

But **what**...is it changing...me **into**? What...am I...**becoming**? I bide my time...in this place...until I am grown...and I consider...this organism...that I am. Sometimes...I am in **awe**...at its strangeness...and complexity...Sometimes...I am almost frightened...by my own possibilities. (The Curse 62)¹⁵

The layout and intense closure of this image give form to the content of the narration. The reader is simultaneously in the earth and in the water, both rooted and free-

¹⁵ Swamp Thing speaks very slowly, a convention indicated by the constant use of ellipses. Throughout the chapter I have replicated his dialogue as it occurs with its ellipses. Where I have removed sections of dialogue I use [...].

floating. Our sense of time is unspecific yet eternal. The closure suggests that Swamp Thing's consciousness is both fractured and whole. More importantly in this depiction of a nature deity, the closure suggests his consciousness is everywhere and in everything which is earthly.

Rendered largely in traditional rectangular and sequential panels, Watchmen is more text-dependent than art dependent. Its multi-layered narrative depends on the often ironic juxtaposition of text against image, whereas Swamp Thing often uses the actual images to make its points. In both works, however, I will examine how complex instances of closure, along with other kinds of comic book 'grammar' such as color use, dialogue boxes, and framing techniques, have been used to support the apocalyptic narrative.¹⁶

In reading interviews with Alan Moore, it becomes clear that his use of the apocalyptic paradigm is not inadvertent, but deliberate. He has obviously given some thought to the subject of Endings. Asked once about utopian themes, Moore replied that writers will always look to extreme situations for creative tension because it gives them an opportunity to 'examine the human world and human beings' under those radical conditions:

...there are really only two extreme points that you can project the world to. One of them is Utopia, the other is Apocalypse. I mean, in actual real life, we'll probably muddle on somewhere between the two, probably for thousands of years yet. But I don't have thousands of years to wait and I'm a writer of fiction... (Khoury 114-5)

¹⁶ The gutter space is only a small part of the overall grammar of comics. From the use of color, to the layout on the page, or the interplay between words and picture, every part of a comic book image affects a reader's understanding of the overall narrative. Even the size of a dialogue bubble or the art style an artist uses helps create meaning within the narrative.

In addition to considering why the apocalyptic paradigm might be an appealing one for a writer to use, Moore also seems to have considered the malleability of the concept of apocalypse. In the recent documentary *The Mindscape of Alan Moore* (2003), he notes that while 'apocalypse' strictly means 'revelation' it has now come to mean the end of the world:

As to what the end of the world means, I would say that probably depends on what we mean by world. I don't think this means the planet, or even the life forms upon the planet. I think the world is just a construction of ideas, and not just the physical structure, but the mental structure, the ideologies that we've erected. That is what I would call the world. Political structures, philosophical structures, ideological frameworks, economies. These are actually imaginary things, and yet that is the framework that we've built our entire world upon.

This looser definition of 'world' is typical of the movement in modern and contemporary writing to widen the interpretation of the vital elements of the apocalyptic paradigm and therefore be able to create new kinds of apocalyptic stories, such as apocalypses of the mind. Perhaps not coincidentally, it also provides an interesting key to Moore's first apocalyptic work, Swamp Thing. For this work, Moore created four apocalypses, each of which interprets 'world' differently: one of the personality, one of the comic book world of Swamp Thing, one of the comic book world outside of Swamp Thing, and one of the reader's world. These different versions of apocalypse, all interrelated and arranged in concentric circles, encompass ever-larger universes.

Swamp Thing was Alan Moore's American debut and eschatological fears run thick through it.¹⁷ Of all his work, this is the one where the author's fascination with apocalypse is

¹⁷ Before 1983 Moore had been working exclusively in the British comic book industry where he had made a name for himself writing for the British comic *2000 A.D.*

most apparent. But *Swamp Thing* had not always had such apocalyptic tendencies; it had started off as a quite different kind of tale.

Swamp Thing was originally the creation of Len Wein and Berni Wrightson, who introduced him in the DC horror comic *HOUSE OF SECRETS* (1972). The original *Swamp Thing* series became defunct after twenty-four issues, not long after the original creators left.¹⁸ Over a decade later, the series was revived by the creative team of Pasko and Yeates. In 1983, Moore took over the series with Stephen Bissette and John Totleben as his primary illustrators.¹⁹ During the course of Moore's three year tenure as writer, the character of the former scientist-turned-swamp creature was essentially remade.

In Moore's hands, the character's back story was reinterpreted, elaborated upon, and expanded to create a richer, more spiritual Swamp Thing. In Wrightson and Wein's story, scientist Alec Holland had been working on a 'biorestorative' formula when an act of sabotage dumped both him and his formula into the Louisiana swamp where his lab was located. What emerged was the Swamp Thing, a plant-like humanoid of lumbering strength and human intelligence. The motivation of the original Swamp Thing was his desperate drive to find a means of restoring himself to his human form.²⁰

Taking pains not to destroy the character's previous continuity, Moore set about

¹⁸ Artist Berni Wrightson left after ten issues, and writer Len Wein followed him three issues later. It was Len Wein who, in his capacity as a senior editor at DC years later, suggested resurrecting the *Swamp Thing* title to coincide with the release of the motion picture based on the character (Wein, Introduction).

¹⁹ Moore's tenure on *Swamp Thing* covered issues #21- #64, though the apocalyptic story runs only through issue #50. It is these issues - #21 to #50 – that I examine in this chapter.

²⁰ Moore has spoken about the original series' limited 'shelf life': 'It was obvious to even the slowest reader that Alec Holland – the Swamp Thing – was never going to find some way to turn himself back to Alec Holland because the moment he did, that would be the end of the series' (Khoury 85).

reinterpreting Swamp Thing's history so that he could essentially start the tale afresh.²¹ His first issue establishes the fact that Swamp Thing can never find a way to return to his human form because he is not human. He is not Alec Holland in plant form. He is 'a plant who thinks it is Alec Holland'. He is, in Moore's new mythology, a plant elemental, a living embodiment of 'the green', the plant-life of the world. Connected to the earth and its vegetation, Swamp Thing feels its pain and can manipulate its strength. Swamp Thing *is* this plant world.

Instead of being bound by the one-motivation action story of Wein and Wrightson's creation, Moore created a character for whom the subtextual possibilities were remarkably rich. This more complex character lent itself to certain themes in particular. There was a natural overlap between the eschatological themes which fascinated him and Moore's concerns about environmental destruction. Additionally, the apocalyptic genre gave Moore an entrée to explore another theme which interested him: theodicy.

With typical scope, however, Moore reworked the apocalyptic paradigm as well as Swamp Thing's origins. Moore worked on the Swamp Thing and Watchmen series concurrently, so it is perhaps no coincidence that both comics concern apocalyptic themes. But whereas Watchmen confronts the complex issue of apocalyptic deity, Swamp Thing is Moore's meditation on New Jerusalem. In the original apocalyptic paradigm, New Jerusalem was a literal place inherited by the faithful. In Moore's updated secular interpretation it becomes a new perspective rather than a new place.

²¹ Moore went back and found 'logical inconsistencies in the original story' which allowed him to say that Holland had died in the lab explosion, but that his consciousness had been absorbed by the swamp's plant life. 'That struck me as something that didn't violate any kind of previous continuity but which suddenly moved the character into new and exciting unknown territory....the best thing that I could do was to tie up all of Marty Pasko's storylines; characters that I was perhaps not interested in continuing with could be moved out of the way; characters that I was interested in exploring...could be moved closer to center stage and I could sort of give the issue a sort of visceral punch by providing the first step to my recreation of Swamp Thing, which was killing him' (Khoury 87).

Moore makes it clear from his first issue that his Swamp Thing series is going to be a story of potential and literal apocalypses. The initial four issues, which comprise the first story-arc, are the story of Apocalypse written in miniature form.²² In it, Moore re-introduces an old DC villain named Jason Woodrue, a scientist who has undergone his own bio-chemical mishap which has turned him into the Floronic Man, also a plant/human creature.²³

In Moore's hands, Woodrue is a kind of anti-Swamp Thing, the green world personified and gone mad. He is 'the dark side of identification with the vegetable kingdom, Swamp Thing's darker self' (Campbell). Woodrue rants indignantly about the injuries done to the plant world by humans. His threatened revenge is just part of the first issue's dual apocalyptic strains, for Moore clearly delineates the first of his many potential apocalypses in the Floronic Man's condemnations: that of an environmental apocalypse. This apocalypse, as Swamp Thing suggests repeatedly throughout the series, is not so much potential as imminent.

This theme is not always as prominent as it is in the first episode, but Moore never lets the reader lose sight of it. He maintains this subtext visually by inserting the odd bit of garbage in panels meant to be showing lush vegetative panoramas. For example, the splash page for issue #25, 'The Sleep of Reason', shows Swamp Thing underwater in his swamp. (Appendix D, Fig. 4) In addition to the distinctly sick-looking shade of green in which this illustration is rendered, there is a discarded hubcap sitting in the silt. Also pictured are a crayfish and a catfish, both creatures which usually dwell in brackish water (Saga of the Swamp Thing 107). In the same issue, a chain-smoking couple drive away in their station

²² There are also some striking resemblances to Milton's Paradise Lost.

²³ Moore says that it was his intent in Swamp Thing to revive the roster of DC supernatural characters, almost all of whom had fallen into disuse as superhero titles became more popular (Khoury 89).

wagon, and the exaggerated exhaust from the car causes a bicyclist to break into a fit of coughing (Saga 119).²⁴

This strategy is also used in ‘Growth Patterns’ (#37), in which Swamp Thing grows himself a new body. The spot in the swamp where he begins to sprout anew is in the shadow of a discarded tin can.²⁵ Throughout the issue, he is always pictured juxtaposed against this piece of trash (The Curse 54-9). Even when Abby discovers and begins to care for him, it does not occur to her to remove this piece of garbage from the Edenic landscape.

Another striking example occurs in an issue which revolves around the illegal dumping of radioactive waste. In ‘The Nuke-Face Paper, Part I’ (#35), artists Bissette and Totleben illustrate a remarkable three page sequence of the burnt-out, polluted and ironically named town Blossomville where the environmental consequences of ill-managed energy policies are made dreadfully apparent. (Appendix D, Fig. 5) The skies are lit orange and red as if reflecting flames, and red smoke drifts across the panels. As Swamp Thing walks through the scene he passes twisted metal hunks, bubbling green puddles, eerie vapors and malformed fungi, all suggestive of a post-nuclear landscape. In the background is the distinct shape of the Three Mile Island nuclear facility which Blossomville is clearly meant to call to mind. The ties to Hiroshima and Nagasaki are implied both in the art and Swamp Thing’s narration:

I walk...through a...bad place. [...] Something...**happened**

²⁴ The smoking is one of Moore’s on-going jokes throughout the series, and the art clearly illustrates the nauseating, cloying aspects of cigarette smoke. John Constantine who rarely appears without a lit cigarette in hand or mouth repeatedly inquires of Swamp Thing, ‘Mind if I smoke?’ and always ignores the creature’s ‘Yes’. Moore is apparently a chain-smoker.

²⁵ The tin can serves double duty: it is a symbol of trash, but because it also carries the issue title, it is also an emblem of narrative (The Curse 51). The link between trash and narrative suggests a pun about how the literary world views comic books.

...here. Something **bright** and **awful** kissed the world...and left...its smeared...blue...lipstick-print. The soil is curdled ...and all that **grows**...grows **wrong**. In a skin of black cinder, puddles reflect fire...red and wet and glistening like sores... The song of stillborn birds echoes...through the deformed metal trees...there is a rattle...in the throat...of the wind...and I am **alone**. Alone in **Deathtown**. (The Curse 15-17)

The rhetorical cadences of Moore's effusive prose, used here to describe the most terrible of landscapes, serves to intensify the reader's horror, and the sequence ends with the creature on his knees among the smoldering detritus with his hand covering his mouth in what appears to be nausea. But a rectangular close-up of the creature is inserted in the foreground of the panel, and in it we see that he is not ill, but weeping. On either side of this insert are the words: 'Please...' and 'Let it not have happened yet...' (The Curse 17).

Such scenes provide the substance of the Floronic Man's histrionic justification for wiping mankind off the planet, a point of view the reader might find compelling, given Moore's iteration of exactly this point throughout the series. As writer Ramsey Campbell notes in his introduction to the collection, Woodrue is effective precisely because he expresses genuine concerns about environmental destruction.

This spectre of environmental apocalypse is constantly in the background of Moore's tenure on the series, and for good reason: it is the only one of the four apocalypses he depicts which has the potential for actually occurring, the only one which affects the reader literally. The other apocalypses only affect the comic book characters and their comic book universe.

To emphasize the reality of the threat and make clear that this is not merely the work of an author's nightmarish imagination, panels in this particular two-part issue are littered with newspaper pages on which stories about toxic fumes, nuclear accidents, sunken

uranium shipments, deadly acid spills, and the ongoing political tussle over waste disposal are all clearly readable. These real news articles bear witness to the environmental damage we are doing and form the fatalistic backdrop of the final page in this particular issue. Acting as a bridge between the fictional world of Swamp Thing and our own real world from which the newspaper stories are taken, the closure here is extremely complex, and reiterates the reality of the danger.²⁶ This initial story-arc is probably Moore's least subtle handling of the environmental issue, but like an abstract it lets the reader know the general themes of the series.

This first story also anticipates Moore's work on apocalyptic deity in Watchmen. As with the issue of New Jerusalem, Moore recognizes that the issue of deity will ultimately have to be addressed if the apocalyptic paradigm is to be useful to a contemporary storyteller. Like Watchmen, Swamp Thing contains complex notions about who or what the deity figure is, mixing traditional Judeo-Christian ideas with both New Age and Pagan ones. While there are numerous god-like characters in the series, it is ultimately Swamp Thing who, as the central character and a walking emblem of Nature, is the vital deity. The analogy was deliberate says Moore: 'I was trying to have the character slowly evolve into a kind of vegetable god' (Khoury 89). Yet Moore does something interesting in his first story: he splits his deity in two, with the Floronic Man acting as the wrathful Judge of the seven seals, and Swamp Thing as the forgiving Christian God.

Both Woodrue's language – laden with Book of Revelation references – and the way he is drawn suggest he is, or at least becomes, a deity. This transformation occurs when he attempts to elevate his own consciousness by tapping into the unconscious Swamp Thing's.

²⁶ The issues are full of this kind of closure. See, for example, The Curse, pages 27-8, 31, 34, and 41.

It is an experiment that not only gives him the knowledge he wants about the plant world but also changes him entirely, turning him into an evil doppelgänger of the plant creature.

The immensity of the realization that Swamp Thing is not just in touch with the plant world but *is* the plant world is implied by the artwork which takes up two full pages of panels (Saga 56-7). Like all fairy tale transformations, this is a painful one, as the blurred images and jagged lines seem to imply (Appendix D, Fig. 6). The pages are also dominated by the image of Woodrue's eyes, and at least three other panels include the image of eyes, clear reference to the fact that Woodrue now sees the enormity of the natural world and its power. The intensity and rapidity of closure in this series of images serves to disorient the reader just as Woodrue is disoriented. It also suggests the kind of blurring of time and place typical of the Book of Revelation where, for example, John simultaneously witnesses the fifth angel release the plague of locust and the result of the plague, though we are told that mankind is tormented by these locusts for a period of five months (Rev. 9.4-6).

Depicted with a leafy crown and loincloth and striking a statuesque pose, the images of the Floronic Man, at least in this instance immediately following his transformation, should call to mind classical representations of Spring or nature gods such as Oberon or Pan. The celebratory rain of blossoms confirms his ascension. But the knowledge of how widespread the green is and how profoundly it affects the world drives Woodrue mad, transforming him into the wrathful Deity and killing off any human vestiges. The narration reads:

...somewhere in the writhing jungle of his mind, the small and scared mammal that was Jason Woodrue twitches once...and then lies still. It begins to rain blossom. He is the Floronic Man, and all that was once human in him is consumed. (Saga 58)

Hereafter, he is pictured as a more threatening, demonic presence, his eyebrows and eyelashes drawn as spiky horns, his fingers clawed, and his eyes white or red holes. The demonic implication of these drawings is not accidental; Moore is playing on the Christ/Antichrist opposition in Revelation. While at the end of this story it becomes clear that Swamp Thing is the only true Christ figure, in these early stages the Floronic Man seems to embrace nearly all the divine roles in the Book of Revelation. He is the 'green messiah' 'come to announce the green millennium'. He is the 'annihilating angel with the thorns' sent to execute the will of the green/God (Saga 91 and 79). Like Michael announcing his mission, he tells his victims:

I am one with the wilderness...Its will works through me. For I asked of it, saying 'What would you have me do?' And it said 'Purify.' And it said 'Destroy.'[...] 'Cut them down, like blighted wood. Let us have another green world!' (Saga 79)

Later, in an explicit reference to Lucifer, Swamp Thing explains to Abby that Woodrue 'fell from grace' (Saga 97). Woodrue is a conflation of false prophet, avenging angel, Satan, and God, a multiplicity of roles which is alluded to by the broken 'shards' which point to him in his final close-up (Appendix D, Fig. 7) and suggest a 'fractured' personality.

Which of these Woodrue really is is not made clear, but in one of the juxtapositions which the comic book form allows, this final image of the broken and pathetic Woodrue show him pleading with his human captors and claiming to be 'human like *you*', while at the same time, directly underneath is the shocked exclamation of one of those captors, '**God...**'. At least it looks to be an exclamation of one of the captors. In a nice bit of ambiguity, the

tail of the dialogue bubble indicates but does not quite connect the exclamation to the captors. Directly beneath this exclamation, however, is a piece of dialogue which is clearly tied to the human captors, and it reads, 'Woodrue? Woodrue, what...What's **wrong** with you?' (*Saga* 102) The effect of this juxtaposition is that a reader could scan the line connecting the two together so that it reads 'God...Woodrue', making their connection explicit, just as Moore may have been intending us to read the conflated character of the Floronic Man.²⁷

The peculiarities of comic book convention and layout allow for a potential second reading of the previous line. The ambiguous placement of the 'God...' between the lines, as well as the jagged edges of the dialogue bubble in which this word appears, potentially overrides the punctuation of the line 'Human like you'. The color and the melting effect of the flesh which acts as background here first leads the eye towards the close-up of Woodrue's face, but the green crown of leaves readjusts the flow of our gaze, directing it to the word 'God...'. The jagged edge of the dialogue bubble, which indicates exaggerated tone, punctuates the word in our silent reading. The effect is potentially that a reader may read over the full stop of 'Human like you.' and see 'God...' as the full stop instead. In that case, the line becomes: 'Human like you, God', so that Moore might be understood to be making a comment on the divinity within human beings, a secular solution to the issue of apocalyptic deity he will explore further in *Watchmen*. More likely, though, is that he is commenting on human hubris in assuming our own divinity as regards the rest of the world, a criticism which would connect to the real apocalyptic threat of environmental destruction which *Swamp Thing* explores.

²⁷ Other elements of comic 'grammar', such as panel shape also help the reader interpret this image. The jagged and pointed panels, like shards of glass, suggest that Woodrue, and through him his perspective, is now broken.

At the same time that Woodrue is being developed as the anti-deity, Swamp Thing is also developed as a deity. Specifically, as the true representative of the 'green' Swamp Thing is tied to the Savior role. His larger view of the world as a complete organism means salvation and forgiveness for mankind, as when the creature gently reminds Woodrue that the humans he wants to wipe out are vital to the survival of the green since they provide the carbon dioxide that plants need to live (Saga 95). In this instance, Swamp Thing's view is patently divine and all-seeing. Later in the series, Abby will also eat the fruit which grows on her plant boyfriend and while Moore is definitely having fun with the sexual connotations here, there is no question that the reader is supposed to make the connection between this act and Christ's command to 'eat of my body', a link which Moore makes explicit by having Abby ask Swamp Thing for exactly that, some form of communion between them (Love and Death 192 and A Murder of Crows 98-100).

The artwork unequivocally makes this connection to the Savior. The final panel of the story contains explicit crucifixion imagery with the Swamp Thing in the place of Christ. (Appendix D, Fig. 8) With arms outstretched, head thrown back, and one leg bent at the knee, Swamp Thing is clearly meant to imitate the classic pose of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, the panel which precedes this contains Swamp Thing's wish that he should 'rise up', a reference to the Resurrection which Moore obviously intends his reader to pick up since the words 'rise up' are deliberately made more noticeable by being put in the yellow dialogue boxes which usually indicate the Swamp Thing's narration.

The crucifixion image is set against a blood red orb which can be read either as the moon setting or the sun rising. We are told a few panels earlier that it is almost dawn, but given what has come before in the story and the fact that this pose evokes how Christ died

for humanity's sins, it is difficult to know whether to read this as a pessimistic or hopeful image, and Moore may deliberately be bringing a modern ambiguity into play here. Are we meant to understand the pose as an embrace of the natural world? Or as an image of mourning for the natural world being sacrificed? Further, why is this orb red at all? A literal explanation is that both moon and sun only look brilliantly red when air pollution causes a particular refraction of light. A more metaphoric one is the apocalyptic overtone of this color in this image, and the subtext suggesting the potential apocalyptic consequences of our environmental destruction.

Emphasizing the reality of the threat, Swamp Thing's fingers extend beyond the borders of this final frame, as if to say to the reader that what he represents here extends beyond the pages of the comic book and into the real world. While Moore will rarely be this preachy again, neither will he let us forget the potentially apocalyptic consequences of our environmental 'sins'. Throughout the remainder of his story, he will continue to hint at this real potential apocalypse even as he is telling tales of alternative apocalypses.

There are three other apocalypses in the Swamp Thing series, and the first of these is also laid out in the first story arc. Unlike the others, it is a wholly personal apocalypse. The 'world' which is destroyed is that of Alec Holland's identity. The New Jerusalem which replaces it is more than just his new identity as a plant elemental called Swamp Thing. This new identity encompasses a new understanding of himself as a Nature god and a new understanding about the connectivity of the planet. As will be the case in the other two apocalypses in Swamp Thing, New Jerusalem is a new world view rather than a literal place.

It is Woodrue who discovers that Swamp Thing is not a man turned plant, but 'a mass of plant fiber that had somehow been infected with the consciousness of Alec Holland' (Saga 40). When Swamp Thing reads Woodrue's report and realizes that his former self is unattainable, the effect of this news is devastating. He lies down in the swamp and becomes rooted there. Woodrue's role as a catalyst in the identity apocalypse is completely appropriate given that he has become a figure of destruction and an agent of purification. Woodrue recognizes that Swamp Thing is not dead but undergoing a transformation of some kind:

Whatever this **looks** like, the problem is psychological. Imagine all those years of hoping that one day he'd retrieve his humanity, only to find he'd never had any in the first place. He's **given up** on being human. [...] You're making the change, aren't you? Giving up the illusion of meathood and sinking back into the soft and welcoming green. It is breathtaking to observe. (Saga 40-2)

The question Woodrue ultimately poses about what will ultimately replace Swamp Thing's humanity is a central preoccupation of the entire series (Saga 46). It will take Swamp Thing many months and many strange encounters to understand finally and exactly what he has become, but long before then the reader will understand. Swamp Thing is Nature personified, and since Nature encompasses the whole of the universe, of which man is a small and easily affected part, this is as good as claiming that Swamp Thing is a deity, though it is worth noting that the definition of godhead is a shifting one in Moore's apocalyptic work. Here, Moore seems to be mixing up, whether intentionally or not,

Pantheism and Paganism.²⁸ But he is no more or less reliant on these definitions of deity than he is on the Judeo-Christian definition of deity, and in fact one might argue that this sort of conflation of kinds of deity, Antichrist figure, or visions of structural time is very much a feature of Moore's (postmodern) re-working of the traditional paradigm in which good and evil, God and Devil, beginning and end have historically been polarized and rigidly defined. And one could go further and claim that such conflations are symptomatic of postmodern re-workings in general, as we'll see in *The Matrix* movies.

Swamp Thing does, in fact, exhibit some characteristics of a Judeo-Christian deity. Through his plant consciousness, which is comprised of all the green of the planet, Swamp Thing has a level of extreme awareness that nears omniscience. That he can control the plant world as he likes makes him nearly omnipotent. A plant consciousness that makes him aware of and simultaneously experience disturbances in the green all over the earth combined with an ability to shed his body and re-grow instantaneously anywhere on the planet where there is plant life to shelter his consciousness means he approaches omnipresence.

In comparison to the Floronic Man he is also benevolent, but Swamp Thing is a modern deity and the question of his goodness is an ambiguous one. Can Nature be good or evil? Are good and evil truly black and white? These particular questions will be essential ones for the apocalyptic conclusion during which the creature confirms his own deity role.

²⁸ The first is the philosophy that everything is God, or that nature and the universe are divine. Paganism, while often incorporating this philosophy, worships gods and divinities *in* nature, and therefore has a tendency to anthropomorphize nature, a tendency most pantheists try to avoid. Woodrue's association with classical nature religions indicates a pagan sensibility. The envisaging of Swamp Thing leans towards this pagan tendency to see Nature as self-conscious, as well, but Swamp Thing's evolution as a sentient being in the series includes the growing understanding that the world and universe are all connected. Hence, part of Swamp Thing's evolution is his movement *from* paganism *toward* pantheism.

In the meantime, the apocalypse of his former self is total, illustrated in a series of dreams the creature has while rooted. These dreams incorporate Alec Holland's past, his self-loathing of the 'monster' he has become, the paranormal adventures of Swamp Thing's previous incarnation, and a debate about identity and humanity. Moore's use of puns and pastiche in these dreams suggests his aim is that the reader pay particular attention to the concepts of identity and humanity.

The first of these dream sequences finds Swamp Thing re-living his wedding reception with his former wife Linda (who died in the same explosion as Alec) also in attendance. Abby and Matt Cable are also at this party, though in 'real life' the couples did not know one another at this time. In this particular sequence Linda sinks into the earth with the regretful words to her husband, 'Alec, I don't feel very well. It's this bullet hole....' Alec's urgent exclamation that 'Linda's **buried!** We've got to dig her up!' is the first reference to burial (Saga 42). The word is highlighted in the narrative bubble to emphasize it. Burial is going to be vital to Swamp Thing's resolution of his identity crisis.

The second important detail about this dream is that Matt dresses Alec in a 'mud-suit'. (Appendix D, Fig. 9) Once on, this mud suit looks exactly like the Swamp Thing, and the mud functions in this case not only to tie Swamp Thing to the earth, but also almost certainly as a sign of disgrace and disgust for that new identity. When Abby points out that Alex cannot breathe inside this suit, Matt begins to dig Alec out of it, only to discover an empty shell. The sequence ends with a panel that straddles both the dream and the 'real world'. Looking more like a lump of moss than a humanoid figure, the image is of the rooted Swamp Thing, but the narration is the final words of the dream: 'Alec isn't in there'.

These words function on a dual level, indicating both what the dream Cables have found inside the mud-suit, as well as Swamp Thing's real and current identity dilemma (Saga 43).

The human Alec and Linda Holland appear again in the following dream. The second sequence begins with a close-up of Swamp Thing's face juxtaposed against a call from off-panel, 'Eats! Come and getcha eats!' Swamp Thing is carrying the unconscious Linda and looking for a doctor to help her. Instead he finds a group of Planerian worms holding a barbeque with the corpse of Alec Holland as the main dish. (Appendix D, Fig. 10) It is the knowledge of certain experiments with this type of worm which first alerts Woodrue that Swamp Thing is not really human after all, so the barbeque is morbidly humorous on many levels. What becomes apparent in this dream is that Swamp Thing equates his former identity with his humanity. Having eaten the corpse of Alec Holland down to the bones, the worms tell Swamp Thing that they have left him the best part, the humanity. They leave with the parting line, 'Try not to lose it'. The dream ends with Swamp Thing mournfully cradling the skeleton of his former self as he walks away from his wife, telling her, 'I'm so sorry, Linda, but I just can't carry **both** of you' (Saga 47-8).

From here on in, the struggle is one to decide whether one must be human to have humanity. If so, then Swamp Thing is the monster he regards himself in the third dream sequence where a pack of monstrous figures, some of them recognizable, set upon him. (Appendix D, Fig. 11) Holding the skeleton in his arms like a baby, Swamp Thing pleads with them, 'No! You can't have it. It's my **humanity**. It's all I've got left'. When the horde plucks at the bones, Swamp Thing breaks into a frenzy of violence, bellowing, '**NO!! IT'S MINE!!**' and tears the assailants to shreds.

One of the monsters torn to bits, and, indeed, the one on which the final panel of this dream sequence focuses, is Frankenstein's monster. The reference calls attention not only to the dangers of misusing science, but also, and more aptly, to the pathetic bind of Shelley's creature who, though monstrous-looking, *does* have humanity.²⁹

We should perhaps also pay attention to the added detail of the buttons in the place of eyes in this depiction of Frankenstein's monster. In the panel where the monster first appears, it has regular eyes, but in these final panels the eyes look more like buttons or scratched coins. The coin reference would remind us of the ancient burial rites of placing coins on the eyes of the deceased in order to pay Charon, the Stygian ferryman, and so the destruction of the monster with coins on its eyes should perhaps indicate the death of Swamp Thing's view of himself as a mere monster. When it becomes clear in the final two images of this Frankenstein monster that the coins are, in fact, buttons, we cannot help but think of doll's eyes, and in particular rag-doll eyes. In conjunction with Swamp Thing's line of dialogue, 'You've all taken enough!' the connection may be to how dolls are manipulated by others. If so, then Swamp Thing's destruction of the creature with rag-doll eyes is a declaration of independence, claiming both humanity for himself and the will to be his own 'person' (51-2).

The last of these dreams occurs immediately before the Floronic Man's transformation sequence, and therefore acts as its parallel: both Swamp Thing and Woodrue are now coming into some knowledge which will utterly transform them. In this final dream Swamp Thing runs through the swamp holding a debate with what is left of his skeleton, held tightly in his huge, clenched fist. (Appendix D, Fig.12) Swamp Thing demands of his

²⁹ Swamp Thing and the Monster share other characteristics, particularly their loneliness and search for connection to other humans

skull why he cannot stop and rest. The answer is a pun on 'human race' with the skull pointing out that Swamp Thing cannot put him down:

Because I'm your **humanity**. I'm **important**. I'm what keeps you **going**. You could let go of **Linda**, but you can't let go of **me**. Oh, I know I'm a little **beaten up** and **battered**, but I'm still worth all the **effort**, aren't I? After all, without **me** there'd be no point in **running**, would there? (54)

The artwork makes clear that this is the turning point for the creature. The dialogue is followed by two panels, one of the Swamp Thing silently slowing, and the second of him stopped entirely, staring at the skull in his fist. Both panels show the action from behind, as if we, the readers, have been watching Swamp Thing run away from *us*. The flight away from his human readers further reinforces his own identity dilemma.

The second panel shows him entirely stopped, with hunched shoulders and head angled in such a way that it is clear he is contemplating the skull of his former self.³⁰ The additional fact that all sense of movement around him has also been removed gives this panel a sense of stillness that reflects not only the sudden cessation of physical movement, but also of the parallel mental process coming to a halt. The single word which Swamp Thing speaks in this panel – 'No' - reinforces this quieting.

The plant elemental sits quietly on a tree stump and even the badgering skull's warning that Swamp Thing will be disqualified from the human race if he stops running cannot make him take up his flight again. The perspective of the action begins to swing around to the front of the creature now; the first view of him seated is a profile in which his resigned slump is still very much apparent, but his downcast face is now also partially seen, as is his gradually loosening grip on the skull. Ensuing panels continue to swing our

³⁰ This is the first of two times that Hamlet is evoked in the identity story.

perspective to the front of the character. By the time we have a panel focused on Swamp Thing's face, he has lain down and begun to take root on the tree; the expression on his face is blank and staring and he has completely released the skull which symbolizes his former identity. (54-5). The final image of Swamp Thing in this issue is of him mossy and overgrown, rooted to his tree stump in the swamp.³¹

Though Swamp Thing will shake himself free of this catatonic state in the next issue in order to save Abby and defeat the Floronic Man, the theme of his personal apocalypse is not finally resolved until several issues later in 'The Burial' (#28). However, the process is clearly begun. After Swamp Thing defeats the Floronic Man, the plant elemental tells Abby that Alec Holland is dead. When she asks who *he* is then, he replies, 'I? I am...the Swamp Thing' (Saga 98).

This panel is taken up with the lush, beautiful bulk of the Swamp Thing's torso and most of his head. (Appendix D, Fig. 13) Behind him is the night sky with one star shining especially brightly over his left shoulder, while over his right, the word bubble containing 'I?' is placed against the backdrop of the night sky. The effect is to float this question in a celestial backdrop and make the question a profound, almost divine inquiry. The other dialogue bubble is set against the muscular bulk of the Swamp Thing's body, so that when he declares himself, this identification is backed by a visual reinforcement.

The pose is indicative, as well. With one hand to his chest and head slightly bowed, the impression is of a gentleman introducing himself. In this image, Swamp Thing's face is made particularly human, with a softening of the usual alien red eyes, and a flattening of the

³¹ Followed as this is by the Floronic Man's transformation which ends the issue, we can see the way Moore has built in the cliffhanger tension needed for serials to work properly: the hero going to 'sleep' as the villain is 'awakening.'

reptilian crest of his nose. His air and posture speak to a gentility we associate with elegant humans, not monsters.

Once again the panel cannot hold all of the Swamp Thing. Only part of his body and head are visible. In the context of the accompanying narrative, the implication is that he is bigger than the story he is in, too large to be properly displayed. The effect of the Swamp Thing's body extending beyond the panel borders in this case is different from the one discussed previously. In that case, his body came through the borders, calling the reader's attention to both the panel's artificial nature and how Swamp Thing reaches out from the comic into the real world beyond. This is apt for an image having to do with a potential 'real' apocalypse. But in this second case, the panel borders hem him in. The effect is not claustrophobic so much as impressive and superhuman. We are now safely within the confines of a fictional story, and as the apocalypse here is a personal but fictional one, Swamp Thing's body must not come out of the comic, but must remain within its limits. Nonetheless, the implication is that the comic is no longer big enough to hold what he has become. It gives readers the sense that they are looking at a character grown divine and god-like.

The next several issues develop the love story and introduce several plotlines that will become important. They also continue to show a Swamp Thing who is discovering what and who he is now that he has accepted he is no longer Alec Holland. It seems unnecessary, even redundant, to give Swamp Thing's former human self a formal burial, but this is exactly what happens in 'The Burial'. Fellow comic book writer Neil Gaiman notes, however, that this issue has a larger significance in the comic book world:

Alec Holland is buried and put to rest in this issue; but that's not all that's buried. It's the end of an era – a celebration of and memorial to the original Len Wein and Berni Wrightson stories, and is the story that gave THE SAGA OF THE SWAMP THING the freedom to move on. The shaggy swamp creature, turning brown with approach of autumn, stares at the smooth and root-laced Wrightson Swamp Thing, fresh out of the swamp, and we see how far we have come.

(Love and Death, Overture)

This, then, is the culmination of a dual apocalypse: one for the fictional character *in* the story, and one for the fictional character in the *real* world. The old Swamp Thing has been laid to rest, and Moore has replaced it with a new version. This newer creation is arguably more complex in appearance and certainly more philosophically profound than its progenitor. Given the ambivalence that Moore seems to feel for the notion of New Jerusalem, this more complex and ambiguous identity seems appropriate as a replacement in a modern New Heaven on Earth.

The issue's mournful tone and its somber use of a mostly dark register of color appropriately mark it out as the tale of ends, even as its final images and caption, 'I don't look back' suggests a rebirth (Love and Death 32). Furthermore, the type of closure favored here is Moment-to-Moment which, given the slow, mournful plot of this particular story, is the most appropriate choice to elicit the quiet, pensive emotions Moore is after. The opening image of Swamp Thing digging a grave in the rain and the handfuls of mud he scoops out recall the mud-suit of the first dream and links the issue to the earlier sequence, and thus to Swamp Thing's struggle with his new identity.

Moore uses a story-telling device in which the past literally confronts the present. As the ghost of the original Swamp Thing rises from the swamp to confront the new one, each

creature reaches out towards the other, but their hands pass through one another's.

(Appendix D, Fig.14) Through their physical inability to connect, Moore suggests that the past has as little hold on the present as the present does on the past. But as Moore's Swamp Thing agitatedly protests that there is so much he must tell his ancestor about his future, the Wrightson creature solemnly raises an index finger to its mouth to indicate silence and then points towards the swamp before fading away again (Love and Death 26-8). Following the ghost's gesture, Moore's Swamp Thing is able to find and retrieve the bones of Alec Holland, and thus give him a proper burial in the grave he himself has dug. The implication is that, though the past cannot grasp the future, it can inform it. Moore lovingly concedes the point, paying homage to his creature's past by having Swamp Thing rip off a piece of his own body, a two-pronged root, to mark the grave where his own history and past are now buried (Love and Death 31). The personal apocalypse therefore encompasses both the individual Swamp Thing, as well as the individual authors/artists of it.

From this point forward, the apocalypses are going to be straightforward ones, at least in the comic book world, a fact indicated by repeated references to and a loose patterning on the Book of Revelation. Moore begins with the return of the Antichrist, signaled by the entrance of a character named Jason Blood, also known as the rhyming demon Etrigan. As Blood heads for his hotel, a tarot card foreshadows and the narration tells us, 'The Devil checked in at noon' (Saga 106).

That Etrigan turns out to be *a* devil, rather than *the* Devil, suggests the same kind of multiplicity of Antichrist figures as Moore devised in his Woodrue story-arc. Indeed, the apocalypses he creates for his comic book world are rife with ambiguity. A number of

superhero figures are ambiguous in word and action, and even Etrigan appears to fight on the side of good, explaining that evil is no simple matter and that he prefers to choose the devil he knows rather than one he does not (A Murder of Crows 159).³²

While the logic in this rhyming demon's answer will not become clear until the denouement, Etrigan's suggestion here that motivation and morality defy simplistic calculation is not the first time that the issue of evil and good has been raised in the series. Throughout, Swamp Thing has mused about the problem of theodicy in the numerous issues whose topics range from real evils of slavery, gun violence, and domestic abuse, to fictional evils in stories where the dead are reanimated, supernatural entities terrorize the living, and dreadful visions suggest the coming End. The juxtaposition of imaginary evils against real ones serves to strengthen the effect of the real violence and evil Moore portrays. A particularly good example occurs in issue #44, 'Bogeymen', in which Swamp Thing sends a serial murderer to his death and then soliloquizes:

Another monster dead. How many more? How many more before this country has been squeezed dry of nightmares? ... Is there some pattern that I should perceive in this senseless pageant of atrocity? Is there some truth that may be divined from the entrails of America? It seems useless. I struggle to impose a structure that has meaning on the madness that churns within this continent, within this world. But tonight, I looked into a man's eyes and glimpsed the abyss and I fear that it may be bottomless. I know that there must be an answer, a light in the blackness, but I don't know if I can find it on my own. (A Murder of Crows 48-9)³³

³² Etrigan's rhyming dialogue often imitates the closing couplets of Jacobean drama, a fitting match given the propensity of both demons and Jacobean drama towards bloodthirstiness.

³³ This outburst shares a tonal and rhetorical quality with some of Rorschach's soliloquies in Watchmen, a 'leakage' which might be explained by the fact that both series were being written simultaneously. Swamp Thing's comment that he struggles to 'impose a structure of meaning' resonates with Vonnegut and DeLillo's similar search for 'sense-making' structures in their apocalyptic works.

Meanwhile, however, the devil's re-appearance on earth is heralded by omens. The sky has turned an ominous shade of red and '*substance and space melted before the awful assault of nothing and nowhere. Time buckled, collapsing in upon itself, future and past embedding in the present*' (A Murder of Crows 73). Since the issue's title is 'Revelation' there can be little doubt that the future/past reference here is supposed to suggest the same disruption of time and place as occurs in the Book of Revelation. In a riff on another great serial writer, the narration reads, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, and it was all of them at once' (A Murder of Crows 74).³⁴ But this is just Moore's way of implying that it is the signs of the times.

In the chaotic images that accompany this pronouncement, Moore has some additional intertextual fun when, in the background, one of the 'heroes', a character with a stutter, pessimistically announces, 'Thuh-thuh-thuh-That's all, folks'. Inserted in this particular moment of the story when the world has been turned inside out, this reference to another comic icon, Porky Pig, is a sly dig at Swamp Thing's innocuous cartoon brethren, as well as the simplistic, naïve time period of his creation. Moore implies that such a view is outdated in a chaotic and complex modern world.

It is at this point that the first specific mention of apocalypse is made. In 'The Brimstone Ballet' (#31), the resurrected Arcane speaks of the evil souls he has raised from the dead: 'They are returned, and they are but the first. It is the apocalypse...my apocalypse!!' (Love and Death 85-6) Moments later, when Swamp Thing steels himself for the battle with Arcane, he tells himself that this is the final battle, a reference that should then immediately call to mind the prophecy of Armageddon (Love and Death 87).

³⁴ See the Vonnegut chapter for more on the use of Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities.

Comments such as ‘Your world will *need* children soon’ (Love and Death 116); ‘soon, the **dark millennium** will fall, and the world will be a **different place**’ (The Curse 88); ‘suicides had felt it. Mistaking it for the day of judgment and resurrection’ (A Murder of Crows 63); and the numerous references that John Constantine’s crew make to the return to Earth of some gigantic evil all make clear the paradigm which Moore is using (The Curse 58).

However, the apocalypse which Moore is foreshadowing is two-fold, and some comic book history is necessary to understand it. The fictional world of comic books is particularly complicated by its serial nature, its long history, and the migratory tendencies of those who write and illustrate them. Characters who had been at the height of their popularity in the Golden Age of comics but had lost favor or become outdated were often reinterpreted later on in the Silver Age, or again in the present day.³⁵ Simultaneously there might be in production multiple comics involving the same character, but at different ages, or living in different locales, or indeed alternative universes.

Batman has been an ongoing serial since it was first created by Bob Kane in 1939, and in it Bruce Wayne is perpetually in his twenties. Yet even as this serial story line continued, other writers were writing different stories which broke with that series’ continuity. Concurrent with the Kane series, for example, Batman appeared as a middle-aged, bitter retiree in Frank Miller’s Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (1986), and as a twisted vigilante locked in a deadly minuet with his insane nemesis, The Joker, in Moore’s own Batman story, Batman: The Killing Joke (1988) which described The Joker’s origins.

³⁵ Though there is disagreement about the actual dates, the Golden Age of comics is considered to be roughly from 1939 to 1949 and the Silver Age from 1959 to 1969.

These multiple realities and parallel universes were known in the comic book world as the 'multiverse'.

By the 1980's this creative freedom was causing difficulties because it interfered with the continuity of the characters' histories. How to explain that Batman is perpetually in his mid-twenties in his on-going serial, but in his battered forties in these one-offs? How to explain casts of characters, some of whom might have been minor or completely different from the ones bearing their same names but who had been brought 'back to life' by more recent creators?

Years of accumulated history were beginning to slow down DC's mightiest champions, and the 'parallel worlds' theory that allowed superheroes from the 1940s and the 1980s to co-exist was starting to interfere with the ideas of a new generation of comic writers, who wanted the freedom to re-interpret their childhood heroes....The issue of parallel worlds and universes was becoming problematic by the 1980's. (Brown)

By mid-decade, a decision was made to conflate these parallel universes and essentially clean house. The result was the ground-breaking, controversial plan which became the twelve part Crisis on Infinite Earths (Wolfman/Perez) story. In it, characters from parallel DC universes mingled freely, all of them working to stop the crisis. Many characters, some of them major, were killed off. Chronologies and character histories were made definitive.³⁶ The endeavor took extraordinarily detailed plotting and planning, and every comic book writer who was then in control of a serial was warned, indeed directed, to incorporate the plot into his or her individual series.

³⁶ In the years following the Crisis endeavor, there has been much debate and criticism which suggests that, in fact, Crisis did not achieve the stated aim of providing a definitive history of the DC Universe.

This apocalypse of the multiple comic book universes and histories is the backdrop for the latter half of Moore's Swamp Thing tenure. While in retrospect one might suspect that Moore had been steering towards this event from the first appearance of John Constantine in the 'Growth Patterns' issue, the Crisis reference is not made explicit until the 'Revelations' issue when Constantine and Swamp Thing are whisked up to a satellite orbiting the earth where an organizational meeting is taking place amongst all the comic book heroes. Over the course of the several panels during which this visit occurs, a reader glimpses Batman, Superman, Plasticman, Alex Luthor, and a host of other recognizable characters from the DC world (A Murder of Crows 80-82). It is in this setting that Moore has Constantine acknowledge the 'Crisis', explaining its plot to both the ignorant creature and any reader who does not already know about it:

The *world*? The *world* isn't ending. It's the *multiverse* that's *ending*....A whole series of parallel *universes*, parallel *earths*...Something's eating its way *through* them, like a *maggot* munching through a stack of *maps*. In order to survive, the *remaining* worlds are being sort of folded together, making them stronger. It'll *work*. A lot of people will finish up *dead*, but it'll *work*....The *material* world will be saved, but there's more to *life* than the *material world*. (A Murder of Crows 79)

This final statement is the first hint that the author is up to something unusual. Moore has the reputation of a maverick. In addition to his long-standing resentment against the comic book companies' financial and licensing rights to creative properties, he simply does not like being told what to do.³⁷ The warning that the material world and the spiritual world are two separate things is Moore's defiant response to his corporate financiers. With

³⁷ 'I don't work in harness', says Moore. 'If I start to feel squeezed, I rise up spitting black blood with snakes coming out of my mouth. I'm potentially explosive. I don't trust 'em. Anytime something could drop and offend me enough to pull the plug' (Stone).

his hand forced, he incorporates the Crisis storyline into Swamp Thing, but in the end, he makes it completely his own story by turning the comic book multiverse apocalypse into a smaller element in the Swamp Thing apocalypse.

In retrospect a reader realizes that this strategy has been foreshadowed earlier. Constantine is given the line, 'Come on, mate...All right, so there's an apocalypse going on outside. So what? I mean, it's not the end of the *world*...' (A Murder of Crows 35). The use of *an*, rather than *the* to refer to the apocalypse and Constantine's punning certainty that this apocalypse is not the end of the world alerts the reader to the fact that Moore is re-adapting the apocalyptic paradigm to incorporate a more contemporary - some would argue postmodern - viewpoint. Which apocalypse? And is it really the End? The multiplicity of apocalypses which Constantine hints at here is literally embodied in the numerous apocalypses which Moore depicts in the series.

Once Moore has fulfilled his duty by mentioning Crisis, he leaves it behind and does not refer to it again. Almost immediately, he begins to steer towards the Ending he has envisaged as the subject matter of Swamp Thing. Walking through the gathering of superheroes, Swamp Thing wonders, 'Are these...the inheritors...of the earth? Are we to have...a brave new age...of gods...and monsters?' (A Murder of Crows 80)³⁸ The question which preoccupies the plant elemental here - what *will* New Jerusalem look like? - is going to be Moore's objective now.

First, however, he must explain the Swamp Thing apocalypse. According to Constantine, the physical collapse of the multiverse will have dire ramifications in the Swamp Thing world:

³⁸The reference is to James Whale's film *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Dr. Pretorius' toast to Henry Frankenstein after he has agreed to renew his monster-making experiments is 'To a new world of gods and monsters'.

This sort of physical destruction is bound to cause temporary disturbances on the psychic plane. Our problem is that there are people who anticipated the disturbance and plan to take advantage of it. (A Murder of Crows 82)

These people are a cult of male witches called the Brujería who have controlled the earth for centuries already, but are now aiming for something higher. As the Brujería's plan is revealed, the closure becomes particularly intense, with panels overlapping and bleeding into one another, and the usual framing devices discarded (A Murder of Crows 87-89). The effect suggests a leakage of evil into our world. Constantine explains:

They plan to bring something back...I'm not even sure what or from where. Sister Anne-Marie thinks it's Satan...our contact in London thinks it's some sort of energy field. Poor old Ben Cox is convinced it's bloody Cthulhu. You see, we don't know what it is...but we know it isn't anything good....after the crisis, everything will be unstable and vulnerable for a while...including the spiritual plane. That's when the Brujería will bring back their entity. It's Heaven, you see? They plan to destroy Heaven. (A Murder of Crows 90)

With one fell swoop, Moore both incorporates and trivializes the Crisis plotline. What's the folding of the multiverse, after all, when Heaven is in danger of being destroyed? The Brujería want a 'new universe' (A Murder of Crows 132). Lest the reader miss the allusion, Moore makes the apocalyptic overtone of the plan explicit:

This is the *ultimate* dark, *ultimate* light. The *forces* and *stakes* here are *fundamental* and *absolute*...and *whichever* side meets its *final destruction* this day, *everything* will be *changed*. (A Murder of Crows 166)

Moore has set himself quite a task now: what exactly *is* this apocalypse going to look like? The next four issues deal with this question, and Moore's solution, when he reaches it, very much reflects trends in contemporary apocalyptic interpretation.

First he must determine what exactly it is that has been summoned by the Brujería. The suggestions by the various Swamp Thing cast members are not encouraging. It is 'the original darkness', 'the primordial shadow itself' (A Murder 155-6). It is a thing that has been 'excluded from the ordered universe since its formation' and the 'prelude to the annihilation of everything good' (A Murder 168, 153). 'This is the soul of darkness itself. A complete absence of divine light' (A Murder 166). This entity has many, if not all, of the features of the traditional Antichrist.

The next challenge Moore and the artists face is depicting this Antichrist figure. Since one of the aims is to update the paradigm, the traditional iconography of the Antichrist is pushed aside in favor of a new image. The traditional satanic iconography is co-opted instead into the portrait of the more ambiguous Etrigan, as is the traditional Horseman of the Apocalypse iconography which is incorporated into the images of Etrigan and his fellow demons riding their hellish 'mounts' into battle (A Murder 175). Instead, Moore chooses to represent his ultimate evil as a rolling black wall, the epitome of (post)modern image-making since each reader can project his own fears and interpretations onto this blank space.

The Armageddon-like battle involves numerous familiar comic book figures, hordes of demons, and scores of angels. One after another, the gathered 'heroes' attack the mysterious evil entity. But the entity engulfs its attackers, holding each of them prisoner inside itself and asking each hero a Sphinx-like question.

With characteristic impulsiveness, the demon Etrigan is the first to attack. The darkness tells him it existed namelessly before Light, but that seeing Light's 'otherness' made it conscious of itself and unhappy. It then asks Etrigan to name it, but Etrigan is bound by his hellish view of the universe and can only see and name the shadow as Evil, the 'absence of God's light, his **shadow-partner**, locked in endless **fight**' (A Murder 180).

Dr. Fate is the next engulfed. Telling him that it has been named Evil, the entity asks Fate to define its nature and purpose. When Fate answers that evil 'is a quagmire of ignorance that would drag us back as we climb towards the immortal light', the entity's reply gives some hint at where Moore is headed: 'Am I so low, then, and is he you serve so high that there can be no possibility of **respect** between us?' (A Murder 185)

Third to attack the darkness is the Spectre. Telling the Spectre that its patience grows thin, the entity asks him why it exists. The hero replies that Evil exists only to be opposed and stamped out so that people will fear to choose it as an option (A Murder 192). Originally we are told the Spectre is 'big enough to have a clearer perspective' on this great shadow. When the great size of The Spectre turns out to be an optical illusion, Moore has a character note the optical trick, saying – again with punning intent - 'the perspective...it's all wrong' (191).

Because each of the first three heroes are bound by a traditional view of good and evil, their answers are also bound by that rigid duality.³⁹ They can only see the entity through this Manichean lens. When the entity spits each out in contempt, we can see Moore's response to that simplistic Old Testament morality. Part of the appeal of the

³⁹ These heroes are, in part, bound by a dualistic morality because it is part of the milieu of the comic medium during the time periods in which they were originally created, a characteristic also noted by Hollis Mason in Watchmen. The Spectre and Doctor Fate were created in 1940. If Etrigan seems of a more ambivalent or flexible morality it may be because he was created later in 1972.

traditional story of Apocalypse lies in its categorical oppositions, but such oppositions may be less likely to resonate with secular readers. To update the apocalyptic paradigm, any author will have to find a solution to this problem of contemporary skepticism. Moore needs to incorporate a perspective which is not so rigid.

Because Swamp Thing's powers are seemingly not as great as those who have already attempted to vanquish the entity, it at first appears that he will not be able to influence the battle. But Swamp Thing is uniquely prepared for this battle because throughout the series he has been pondering the very questions which the Entity now poses. When Swamp Thing steps willingly into the darkness and is himself asked the purpose of evil, he replies:

I have tried...to make sense of that darkness...and I have failed. I have seen **evil**...its **cruelty**...the **randomness** with which it ravages...innocent...and guilty **alike**...I have not...**understood** it...I asked...the **Parliament of Trees**...whose knowledge is **older**...**greater** than mine...They seemed to insist...that there **was** no evil...but I...have **seen** evil...and their **answer** was **incomprehensible**...to me...And yet...they spoke of **aphids** eating **leaves**...bugs eating **aphids**...themselves finally devoured by the **soil**...feeding the **foliage**. They asked...where **evil** dwelled...within this cycle...and told me...to look...to the **soil**...The black soil...is **rich** in foul **decay**...yet **glorious life**...springs from it...But however **dazzling**...the flourishes of **life**...in the **end**...all **decays**...to the same black **humus**...Perhaps **evil**...is the **humus**...formed by **virtue's decay**...and perhaps it is from...that dark, sinister **loam**...that virtue grows **strongest**?

(A Murder 194-5)

This is Moore's New Jerusalem: not a place, but a new understanding, one which encompasses both evil and good, seeing them as part of the same thing. In this moment of revelation, Swamp Thing achieves his personal New Jerusalem as well, since it is with this

comprehension that he finally understands what he is and where he fits into the larger scheme of the universe.

Ironically, this modern solution is not new at all. The notion that evil and good are two parts of a whole has very old roots, particularly in far Eastern cultures. Moore acknowledges that debt visually. (Appendix D, Fig. 15) As the dreaded meeting of the Light and Dark approaches, the artwork indicates the battle takes the form of a pair of hands, one Light, one Dark, reaching out for one another.⁴⁰ The narration tells us that the hands are flowing together, and in this moment of swirling chaos, the universe takes the form of the Chinese yin/yang symbol, and then is reinterpreted as the pupil of the narrator (A Murder 199).⁴¹

Moore has been hinting at this resolution all along. As far back as the ‘Revelations’ issue, Constantine has told the reader, ‘Everything’s interconnected, stupid’. Even Etrigan tells us ‘God’s balance must endure’ as he prepares for battle (A Murder 82 and 172). Swamp Thing’s own rumination before the final battle, ‘Is evil unavoidable?’ also prefaces the apocalyptic conclusion (A Murder 169).

In the quiet after the battle, Swamp Thing and the others discuss this denouement, remarking that while the world looks the same, it feels different. ‘Light and Shade are still everywhere about us...only the conflict **between** them has altered’, says the mysterious Stranger (A Murder 201). In a lyrical passage clarifying the apocalyptic re-working of New Jerusalem, the Stranger tells Swamp Thing:

⁴⁰ The image also recalls a detail of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel in which God creates Adam. This is a moment of ‘creation’ in Swamp Thing, too: that of the New Jerusalem.

⁴¹ The yin/yang symbol represents all the opposite principles in the universe, including good and evil, and includes in its iconography the understanding that each opposite actually produces the other.

In the heart of *darkness*, a *flower* blossoms, *enriching* the shadows with its promise of *hope*...in the fields of *light*, an *adder* coils, and the radiant tranquility is lent *savor* by its sinister *presence*. Right and wrong, black and white, good and evil...All my *existence* I have looked from *one* to the *other*, fully embracing *neither one*...Never before have I understood how much they *depend* upon each other. (A Murder 202)

This more nuanced view of good and evil is one which many contemporary authors and filmmakers appear to have also adopted in their re-workings of the apocalyptic paradigm. Moreover, the abandoning of certain definitive elements of the Christian paradigm, such as absolute morality, suggests that other, equally Christian, elements might be subject to re-interpretation, as well. Indeed, this is the case with the traditional apocalyptic understanding of the structure of time, an envisioning of time which is largely abandoned in contemporary re-workings of the paradigm.⁴²

Often, contemporary authors have rejected the Christian notion of linear history and returned instead to a more ancient notion of history as cyclical. The Mesopotamian, Zoroastrian, and Ancient Greek cultures all regarded history as a cyclical process in which the world is endlessly destroyed and recreated. Christianity abandons that cyclical view and adheres to an interpretation of history as linear.⁴³ Apocalypse is therefore rooted in a notion of linear history, and sees the Last Judgment as the end of history. That is not true of the ancient cyclical view, which sees endings as part of beginnings. It is a common strategy for contemporary authors to return to this more holistic and flexible view of time in order to

⁴² As noted in the introduction, the overall structure of time is a different issue from where *in* that structure a prophet or visionary is given access to through his vision. The affinity that comics and film share with the Book of Revelation to narratively render the apocalypticist's dislocation in time has nothing to do with how time, as an overall structure, is imagined to be designed.

⁴³ Christianity is not the first religion to imagine time as linear; it draws its understanding of linear time from its Jewish roots, which link linear time with the idea of monotheism.

make their apocalyptic stories resonate with modern skepticism about point of view and narrative.

Watchmen

A cyclical view of history is certainly implied in Moore's 1986 twelve-part comic, Watchmen. Dr. Manhattan's final comment, '*Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends*' (12:27), makes the point with a bluntness which is characteristic of this work.⁴⁴ In Watchmen, Moore again uses the apocalyptic paradigm, but his aims as regards both the paradigm itself and the text's larger theme are quite different than in Swamp Thing. Where Swamp Thing focuses on Moore's environmental concerns and the issue of New Jerusalem, Watchmen, illustrated by Dave Gibbons, focuses largely on reworking the superhero genre and the idea of apocalyptic deity.

Both Gibbons and Moore have repeatedly talked about the unusually collaborative nature of this particular project, and neither man has been able to remember specifically who had which ideas during the intense partnership. Much of the plot was crafted along the way rather than in advance, though the aim was always to deal with how superheroes would affect and behave in the real world. Gibbons has said that they wanted 'to make the story the paramount thing' (Sabin, Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels 165), and that Moore was 'more concerned with the social implications' of the story, while Gibbons was more

⁴⁴ The textual citations here are for the graphic novel and refer to the chapter and page *within* the chapter, since the original pagination was for individual issues of the comic and was retained in the graphic novel form. Moore added 'codas' to each issue of Watchmen, so that the comic panel format of each issue was then followed by a piece of fictitious text - a memoir, case history, academic article, etc. - which further elucidates the plot. Where I cite from these codas, I give the name of the fictitious fragment, chapter, and page *within* that fragment. Again, each coda was separately paginated to give it the illusion of being a real text source.

‘involved in the technical implications’(Groth 101).⁴⁵ In spite of their partnership, however, I am going to cautiously refer to Moore as the ‘author’ of Watchmen, since its ethos is so close to that of his other work.

By the mid-1980’s, the superhero genre was so well-established in comics that every reader was familiar with its conventions and superhero ‘types’.⁴⁶ Moore and Gibbons, along with writer/illustrator Frank Miller in Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, were among the first to turn the conventions on their heads and begin a revisionist movement in the superhero genre.

I think...everybody assumed that it was going to be...the super-heroes take over. We never said that. We said that we were going to try to treat them realistically....Our intention was to show how super-heroes could deform the world just by being there, not that they’d have to take it over, just their presence there would make the difference. (Groth 101)

There was a fortunate confluence among the issues which interested Moore at this time. Believing that ‘all comics are political’, Moore realized that one of the real-life ramifications of having superheroes was an effect in the political spectrum, and thus Watchmen’s theme also gave him a perfect platform to address what he saw as the unbearable political climate of the day (Sabin, Adult Comics 89).

Moore found the conservative politics of Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in America troubling. To his mind, their policies were not only uncompassionate, they had brought the world to the edge of a nuclear confrontation. Moore’s response to Thatcher’s politics had

⁴⁵ There are those who believe that Gibbons’ contribution to the story development has been under-rated, in part because he has been so modest about the part he played and in part because Moore has largely taken credit (Sabin, Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels 165).

⁴⁶ The stock types of superheroes include superhuman heroes with god-like powers such as Superman, obsessed vigilante-types who seek to right the injustices of the world such as The Punisher, patriotic heroes such as Captain America, and humans whose extreme wealth or intelligence has allowed them to acquire heroic personas because of their inventions or extraordinary cleverness, such as Batman.

been to write V for Vendetta about a Britain turned fascist. Watchmen was meant as a similar critique of America.

This is not antiAmericanism, it's antiReaganism, and these are only personal opinions, not necessarily shared by Dave...My personal feelings, because I'm the writer and can do anything that I want, is that at the moment a certain part of Reagan's America isn't scared. They think they're invulnerable....they're not afraid, and they can gloss over the terror of the nuclear stockpiles, the world situation and all that and just think, 'Hey, we're doing all right, we're okay.'

...I was consciously trying to do something that would make people feel uneasy. In issue #3 I wanted to communicate that feeling of 'When's it going to happen?' Everyone felt it. You hear a plane going overhead really loud, and just for a second before you realize it's a plane you look up. I'm sure that everybody's...done that at least once. It's something over everybody's head, but nobody talks about it. At the risk of doing a depressing comic book we thought that it would be nice to try and...yeah, try and scare a little bit so that people would just stop and think about their country and their politics. (Groth 100)⁴⁷

At the same time, Moore could explore how 'real' people would likely react if superheroes *did* exist in our world and thereby have the means to essentially de-construct the superhero genre which, to Moore, had gotten both staid and silly: 'It doesn't matter how sophisticated they are, they're still about men with their underpants over their trousers' (Sabin, Adult Comics 98). Watchmen allowed him to address both issues and, given the prominence of nuclear fear at the time, an apocalyptic scenario was the perfect way to do so.

Where Swamp Thing had been concerned with the question of New Jerusalem and the existence of evil in a modern world, Watchmen took on a different aspect of the

⁴⁷ In an October 2001 interview, Moore said, 'The apocalyptic bleakness of comics over the past 15 years sometimes seems odd to me, because it's like [Watchmen] was a bad mood I was in 15 years ago. It was the 1980's, we'd got this insane right-wing voter fear running the country, and I was in a bad mood, politically and socially and in most other ways. So that tended to reflect in my work. But it was a genuine bad mood, and it was mine. I tend to think I've seen a lot of things over the past 15 years that have been a bizarre echo of somebody else's mood. It's not even their bad mood, it's mine, but they're still working out the ramifications of me being a bit grumpy 15 years ago' (Tasha Robinson).

paradigm: that of the deity, a question apt for the nuclear age. What has happened to God in this eschatologically-charged secular world? In keeping with that question, Moore also takes up the issue of judgment in the modern world: who judges and by what right?

Like many apocalyptic stories, Watchmen is set during a transitional moment in time. Its characters are poised between two eras, looking both forward and backward, a tension epitomized by the marketing war between Adrian Veidt's Nostalgia and Millennium lines of cosmetics. The issue of time (and its complement 'the times') is a preoccupation of the series, and, Moore suggests, should preoccupy its readers, too.

Aside from the importance of nostalgia (the product and the longing) to the story, Moore uses several means to keep the issue of time at the forefront of the reader's mind. The most obvious of these is the image of the clock which appears both at the beginning and end of each chapter. At the end of every chapter the clock (which first noted the time as twelve minutes to twelve), appears with its hand another minute closer to midnight and with increasing amounts of blood threatening to cover its face, an image which is echoed in the ironic smiley face pin with the blood streak which also appears throughout the novel. While this midnight hour is pivotal to the plot since it is the moment at which Adrian Veidt's plan comes to fruition, the clock is also clearly meant to emulate the Atomic Doomsday Clock which was designed by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in 1947 as a representation of

pending nuclear danger.⁴⁸ This particular image connotes the emphasis on time as well as the apocalyptic tenor of the 'times'.

Moore uses various means to keep the focus on time. The name of the first group of masked heroes is the Minutemen and there are members of the group, like Hollis Mason and Sally Jupiter, for whom time, particularly the past, is important. Both these characters are also given dialogue which articulates the apocalyptic fears that pervade the 'new' world. In his memoir, Hollis writes of a 'bleak, uneasy feeling in the air' after World War II, declaring, 'it was impossible to live through the 1950's without a sense of impending catastrophe bearing implacably down upon the whole country, the whole world' ('Under the Hood: III', 3:13). Sally tells her daughter, 'things are tough all over, cupcake, an' it rains on the just an' the unjust alike...' (2:8), a statement which, in addition to describing the times, speaks to the apocalyptic issue of judgment that becomes important later.⁴⁹

Beyond these characters, there are chapter titles such as 'Watchmaker' and background visuals such as the poster of Dali's famous painting *The Persistence of Memory* with its melting clocks (4:16) and the *Time* magazine cover of a watch stopped at the instant of the Hiroshima blast (4:24), another double reference to time and 'the times'. There are references to literature such as Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias' with its conjunction of ancient and modern time. The title itself indicates this preoccupation with time.

⁴⁸ Since it was first designed in 1947, the hands of the clock have been moved periodically by the *Bulletin* to indicate the level of danger of a nuclear war occurring. The minute hand has been moved seventeen times since the clock's inception. In 1984, at the time immediately preceding Moore and Gibbons' collaboration, the hands of the clock were the closest they had been to midnight since 1953 when the clock read two minutes to midnight in response to the U.S. and U.S.S.R. both testing nuclear weapons within the same year. In 1984, in response to the accelerated arms race, the clock read three minutes to midnight. The clock was last changed in 2002 when it read seven minutes to midnight, a change brought on by the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, as well as the information that terrorist groups were seeking to acquire nuclear and biological weapons.

⁴⁹ There is also a biblical allusion to Matthew 5:45 in Sally's reply, but it is meant ironically since the Sermon on the Mount from which this line is taken is about loving one's enemies, an attitude few characters in *Watchmen* could be accused of adopting, especially the Comedian about whom the comment is made.

But like most things in this text, the title is meaningful on more than one level.

Moore's title comes from Juvenal's quip in Satires VI, about the impossibility of preventing a wife's infidelity by setting a watch over her: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* ('Who watches the watchmen?'). But the word 'watchmen' has its own set of associations with the numerous watchmen of the Bible. We are to understand, therefore, that Moore sees his text as belonging to both traditions of writing, classical and Judeo-Christian. Moore further appears to see the text as belonging to a political tradition, since he deliberately ties Watchmen to the political sphere with his concluding note quoting the 1987 Tower Commission Report which *also* used the Juvenal quip about watchmen as its epigraph.⁵⁰ The reference to the Biblical watchmen is itself complex because not all the watchmen of the Bible are watching for the same thing and not all of their missions are alike.

There are biblical watchmen who are blind, literally and figuratively, and these watchmen certainly act as corollaries to the Juvenal quotation, since the suggestion is that leaders may not 'see' (Isa. 56.10). But others, like Ezekiel, are made watchmen by God in order to deliver warnings (Ezek. 3.17). Jeremiah is both the deliverer of warnings and is given the mission of leading his people back to the path of righteousness (Jer. 6:17). These biblical watchmen are related to Watchmen in the sense that the text can also be read as a jeremiad. Jesus admonishes his disciples to keep watch for the End and for false messiahs (Mark 13), a warning which is significant as it applies to Ozymandias in Watchmen. And the reference to watchmen in Psalm 127 - 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain' (Ps.

⁵⁰ As the Tower Commission report came out a month after the Watchmen series ended, it was not until the series was collected into graphic novel form that the epigraph was added. Moore says there were numerous 'spooky...coincidences happening around the work' such as this simultaneous use of the Juvenal quotation (Kavanagh).

127.1) - suggests how a reader is supposed to interpret the ending of Watchmen: Veidt's plan to build a new world is bound to fail since he acts of his own volition rather than by God's.⁵¹

The title Watchmen also puns on a 'watch man', a man who deals in watches. In Watchmen, this is clearly Jon Osterman, whose father was a watchmaker, and whom Jon originally intended to emulate. This pun is re-iterated through a second double-entendre on the word 'watchmaker' which appears in connection with Jon as the title of Chapter Four. This chapter details how Jon became Dr. Manhattan, an incident directly related to a watch. The word 'watchmaker' itself evokes the 'argument from design', one of whose exponents, William Paley, used the analogy of God as the 'Divine Watchmaker' of the universe in his 1802 work Natural Theology: or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature.

Dr. Manhattan is more than merely Moore's version of a superhuman hero; he is Moore's version of a deity. Numerous elements throughout Watchmen suggest Dr. Manhattan's deity status, not least the outright declaration by a former associate that 'God exists and he's American' in reference to Osterman ('Dr. Manhattan: Super-powers and the superpowers', 4:II). Furthermore, the previous chapter, 'The Judge of all the Earth', ends with the Genesis quotation 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' As the quotation is laid into a black strip under an image of Jon sitting below a night sky, the effect is to frame

⁵¹ It is strongly suggested that the times have only been superficially changed by Veidt's devious plan. Rightwing hatred and political views, as symbolized by the survival of Hector Godfrey and *New Frontiersman*, have survived in the new New York, and editorial assistant Seymour's hand hovers over Rorschach's diary which could expose Veidt's plan and undermine its supposedly benign effects. Moreover, the comic ends with the same image that began it, the smiley face with 'bloody' arrow resembling a minute hand. In this case, the smiley face is on Seymour's t-shirt and the 'bloody' arrow is sauce dropped from his hamburger, but the implication of this echo seems unavoidable: that the dreadful circumstances represented by this emblem haven't changed, only the location of that dread.

Jon and clearly tie this quotation to him. It is another suggestion of Jon's deity status, and foreshadows the following chapter which makes this more explicit.

But if the title Watchmen is plural, that suggests a multiplicity of gods in the narrative, and indeed Moore has created three such figures. Thus the title also hints that deity is the element of the apocalyptic paradigm upon which Moore is going to focus. As I have noted, Moore recognizes that the absolutist morality of the Bible, and of Revelation in particular, will not necessarily translate into the complicated contemporary world. If he is going to write a contemporary apocalyptic story, he must somehow bring the concept of deity as much into a 'real' setting as he does his superheroes. But by making his superheroes god-like and showing the results of having a 'real' superhero in a 'real' world, he also, by implication, applies the same critique to deity. Predictably, then, in this translation his deities suffer much the same dent to reputation as the superheroes. To the extent that deities are always figures who render judgment, Moore also finds himself dealing with the issue of morality in the contemporary age, and the absolute morality of Revelation also is critiqued when Moore ultimately indicates the non-viability of such absolutist perspective in the 'real' world.⁵²

Moore's main strategy for accomplishing this goal is to create three separate gods in Watchmen: Rorschach, Ozymandias, and Dr. Manhattan. In much the same way that he demystifies his superheroes, Moore sets his deity characters loose in the 'real' world of Watchmen, extrapolating their responses to contemporary society, as well as contemporary

⁵² Moore highlights the morality issue in several ways, but the most obvious is his persistent reference to the controversial Vietnam War. Moore also uses the Comedian to highlight the slippery morality of the modern age. As an individual, the Comedian's actions are regarded as sociopathic, yet the same behavior in the name of his government leads to his being regarded as a war hero and an Uncle Sam-like figure associated with the country itself, an ironic commentary by Moore who has said that having heroes is dangerous for exactly this reason (Khouri 115).

society's response to them. By roughly associating each of his deities with a biblical era and aspect of God, and then putting that figure into the 'real' world to see what happens, Moore is additionally able to explore the ideas which humans have always had about their deities. But, as will become clear, the idea of deity in Watchmen is a fluid one, not only conflating different kinds of gods, but also shifting between aspects of the same god.

It is no coincidence that Rorschach's language, its cadence and even vocabulary, is reminiscent of Old Testament jeremiad. His first journal entry, also the first words of the comic book, set him up as the feared Judge of contemporary society and a deity figure modeled after the wrathful aspect of the Old Testament God, though perhaps one mediated by a religious right perspective which resents modern degeneracy.

Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'Save us!'...and I'll look down and whisper 'No.' They had a choice, all of them. They could have followed in the footsteps of good men like my father or President Truman. Decent men who believed in a day's work for a day's pay. Instead they followed the droppings of lechers and communists and didn't realize that the trail led over a precipice until it was too late. Don't tell me they didn't have a choice. Now the whole world stands on the brink, staring down into bloody hell, all those liberals and intellectuals and smooth talkers...and all of a sudden nobody can think of anything to say. (1:1)

As the God of Abraham was a vengeful God, so is Rorschach. Before he enters Happy Harry's bar to interrogate the denizens, he writes in his journal: 'Beneath me, this awful city, it screams like an abattoir full of retarded children....The dusk reeks of

fornication and bad consciences. I believe I shall take my exercise' (1:14).⁵³ He punishes the guilty with impunity and rationalizes his violence against the innocent by arguing that they are surely guilty of something.⁵⁴ This is the voice of a contemptuous and vengeful god. Neither should the reference to a slaughterhouse elude us. These sinners are cattle to be slaughtered at will, and the Rorschach god takes a grim satisfaction in doing his job. He looks forward to his 'exercise', though we should perhaps read this line as 'exercising his judgment'.

Yet Moore tells us something about Rorschach's style of deity almost immediately in Watchmen's opening panels. It is suggested that Rorschach's view is overly narrow and rigid through a series of panels which give the reader ever-greater perspective on the scene overlaid with Rorschach's voice. (Appendix D, Fig. 16) As the view draws farther up and away from the initial panel, the information, which is not immediately interpretable except through Rorschach's words, becomes more comprehensible to readers as they are able to determine specifically what they have been looking at. The final words of Rorschach's journal entry here – '...and all of the sudden nobody can think of anything to say' – are immediately contradicted by the final panel on the page, in which a detective, leaning out of the window to observe the place where Edward Blake hit the ground, comments, 'Hmm. That's quite a **drop**' (1:1).

⁵³ The abattoir image is reflected in the first panels of Chapter One, though the comment is made later in the chapter.

⁵⁴ There is a troubling ambiguity here given that the reference to slaughtering retarded children potentially flags a Nazi connection. Does Rorschach read the 'abattoir of retarded children' as a group of innocents needing to be saved by him? Or is it a group to be exterminated? Part of what drove Rorschach to become a masked adventurer was the butchering of an innocent child, and he certainly doesn't like Moloch (named for a god to whom children were sacrificed). On the other hand, Rorschach is himself linked to a fascist mentality (see n.57). Rorschach doesn't see himself as a child-murderer, and neither does the reader who has access to his thoughts in his journal, but it's clear that the other characters of Watchmen think Rorschach is capable of anything.

This dialogue in which the detective immediately belies what Rorschach has said is the first indicator that Rorschach's view may not be trustworthy. The gradually widening perspective on this scene says the same thing visually. The opening image, which is so tightly focused that it is mostly meaningless to the reader, can only be initially understood through Rorschach's words, 'The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood'. Yet as the perspective draws away from this narrow focus, the reader is given a larger view that contradicts Rorschach: in fact, the streets are not full of blood, though there is certainly blood on the street. Moreover, as the perspective widens, readers are able to interpret the information in the panels for themselves without depending on Rorschach's warped perspective. Finally, the detective's statement with the word 'drop' in boldface is an excellent example of one of Moore's comic book innovations: the use of a piece of dialogue in one scene to confer meaning at the same time about something in another. Usually these juxtapositions are ironic. Here, the detective's words render judgment on the Rorschach perspective to which the reader has just been listening. It also verifies what the reader has now gleaned: that someone has fallen out of a skyscraper window and plunged to his death. By emphasizing the word 'drop', there is the suggestion that Rorschach's view is both 'far out' and a 'low' view of things.

Thus, the visual strategy warns the reader to be wary of Rorschach's perspective. This warning about Rorschach's uncompromising, unforgiving Manichean view also suggests that the wrathful aspect of the Old Testament deity with which he is associated is outdated and ill-equipped to operate in a modern world. It is a suggestion that Moore makes explicit in a flashback to Rorschach's prostitute mother telling a client that her son is 'kinda backwards' (6:3).

But more than just Rorschach's narration alerts us to his association with an outdated *weltanschauung*. For, with his trench coat, fedora and pinstripe suit tying him to the 1940s and 1950s, and his first words holding up President Truman and the related catch-phrase 'A day's work for a day's pay' as part of his guiding principles, Rorschach himself is an embodiment of outdated fashions and ideals.⁵⁵ Moreover, Rorschach's costume specifically ties him to the *noir* detective figures of mid-century pulp fiction. In his memoir, Hollis Mason describes this pulp fiction as having an uncomplicated view of good and evil, but since Hollis' autobiography is clearly mourning the loss of a world which no longer exists, there is an associated implication that Rorschach, like the pulps, is too simplistic in view to survive the new age, a fact that turns out to be literally true since his uncompromising views ultimately ensure his own destruction.

Rorschach's costume has a further meaning here. Such costumes belong not just to the pulps, but also to the early comic books which derived from them. Thus, Rorschach is also an embodiment of past comic book heroes. When Moore and Gibbons undermine Rorschach's perspective, they also indicate how ill-suited he, and by extension the old superhero genre, is for the contemporary age.

Yet, recognizing the appeal of this more rigid Old Testament morality, Moore allows Rorschach to argue his position, and he never undermines the character's strength. Unlike Ozymandias, a prissy golden-boy who does charity shows and markets his crime-fighting persona, Rorschach demands our grudging respect for his single-mindedness and willingness

⁵⁵ In a later scene, Rorschach retrieves his costume from its hiding place in an alleyway under a Nostalgia poster, further emphasizing the character's ties to the past (5:18). Joseph Dewey notes that Truman, like Churchill, adopted the language of religion in talking about the atomic bomb, so Rorschach's allusion to this particular politician may not be merely an invocation of nostalgia; it may also be a reference to a particular eschatological vision of politics.

to act.⁵⁶ The American setting of Watchmen is amenable to this response; a tradition of glorifying vigilantes, both real and fictional, means that American crime-fighters, like Dirty Harry, have often been portrayed as borderline criminals, while criminals, like Jesse James, have been depicted as enforcers of justice. And this is the double-edged sword of vigilantism: a civilized and law-abiding society cannot indulge in swift, retributive justice of the kind associated with vigilantes, and yet at the same time, we envy the vigilante's ability to ignore the rule of law to 'do what's right'.

The thin line between the vigilantism we admire and anarchy we disavow is one which Moore explores throughout the comic, particularly in the characters of Rorschach and the Comedian in whom he embodies the tension between the 'street fascist' rhetoric of order and 'decency' which Rorschach uses and the actual ideology of fascism which the Comedian, as a government agent, could be said to represent. Moreover, Moore hints that the wrathful Old Testament God is not so different from a vigilante. Rorschach clearly moves back and forth over the line from 'benevolent' vigilante to 'malevolent' vigilante, but even so, there is a part of the reader which cheers him on because his mission is to destroy evil and admires the steadfast vision of a character who can still claim in the face of his own death, 'No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise'(12:20).⁵⁷ The reader

⁵⁶ Moore himself exhibits a certain amount of nostalgia for this old-fashioned morality. Explaining his attachment to Superman in his youth, Moore has stressed its absolutism: 'I got my morals more from Superman than I ever did from my teachers and peers. Because Superman wasn't real – he was incorruptible. You were seeing morals in their pure form' (Pappu). But this 'purity' is incompatible with the Watchmen *mise-en-scène*.

⁵⁷ Moore includes criticism of both vigilantism and fascism. Rorschach is regarded by society as a dangerous lawbreaker, and his psychoanalyst, Dr. Malcolm Long, calls Rorschach Kovacs's 'unhealthy fantasy personality' (6:8). Veidt describes the Comedian as 'practically a nazi' (1:17), a connection that is iterated by Laurie when she links Dachau to the Comedian in a conversation with her mother (2:2). Moore implies the potential for shared ideology between the Comedian and Rorschach by linking them at least three times in the work. The first is when Rorschach replies to Adrian that, 'you might as well call me a nazi too' (1:17). Veidt's thoughtful response suggests he agrees the comparison is apt. The other two instances are when Rorschach expresses respect and admiration for the Comedian, the first time at the Comedian's grave (2:26-8) and the second during his description of the first Crime Busters meeting (6:15).

wants this godlike strength and protection at the same time that he fears it will be turned on him. But while Rorschach remains a steady indictor of immorality throughout the comic, his dated morality and Manichean views ultimately ensure his own destruction when he encounters a 'deity' whose views are less rigid and therefore more apt for the complexities of the new world.

The paradox at the emotional core of this scene makes it one of the most surprisingly moving moments of the comic. Rorschach's angry tears as he affirms Dr. Manhattan's decision to destroy him imply that he recognizes his culpability in his own death. (12:24). It is a perspective on Rorschach which seems confirmed by the use of the Nietzsche quotation 'Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you' at the end of Chapter Six, which probes Rorschach's psychology.

In Rorschach, Moore extrapolates from the judgmental vigilante to a godlike Judge, but the deity is not the only role assigned to Rorschach in Watchmen. In another of the significant conflation of Moore's apocalyptic re-working, Rorschach does double-duty as both the apocalypticist of Watchmen and the revengeful god of whom the prophet warns. In his day-to-day existence as Walter Kovacs, Rorschach is identified by police officers as the 'prophet-of-doom sandwich-board man seen locally over the last several years' ('New York State Psychiatric Hospital: Early History: A Summary', 6). It is in this guise that the reader first encounters Rorschach in the second panel of the comic. With the voice of Rorschach pronouncing over him, a man carrying a sign reading 'The End is Nigh' walks through the blood on the sidewalk. This prophet persona appears throughout Watchmen, allowing Rorschach access to places and information that he would not normally have, simply because this prophet, like so many, is ignored by the larger society. No coincidence, then,

that the psychiatric report on Kovacs reveals that while he was a resident of the Lillian Charlton Home for Problem Children he excelled in both literature and religion ('New York State Psychiatric Hospital: Early History: A Summary', 6).⁵⁸

Long before Chapter Five when Rorschach is unmasked by the police, the reader has begun to suspect that there is a connection between this creepy apocalypticist and Rorschach. Rorschach's journal gives voice to the apocalyptic sensibilities of the mostly silent Kovacs:

On Friday night, a comedian died in New York....Nobody cares. Nobody cares but me. Are they right? Is it futile? Soon there will be war. Millions will burn. Millions will perish in sickness and misery. Why does one death matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of armageddon I shall not compromise in this. But there are so many deserving of retribution...and there is so little time. (1:24)⁵⁹

Later, Rorschach will voice similar sentiments as he and Dan stand in Veidt's office trying to figure out what Ozymandias has planned. Rorschach wonders aloud who would have reason to trigger Armageddon, and then digresses about Veidt's attachment to Ancient Egyptian culture. Rorschach makes the connection without realizing it: the Egyptians were not merely 'death-fixated', they had an apocalyptic vision of their own. Rorschach's rhetoric converges with that of Kovacs's apocalypticist in his announcement, 'Need answers quickly. World on verge of apocalypse. Death and War already here. Other horsemen can't be far behind' (10:20).

⁵⁸ The name of the home alludes to Charlton Comics who had a group of superhero characters on whom the characters of *Watchmen* are loosely based. Moore and Gibson's original plan had been to resuscitate these dormant characters, but their vision was so extreme that their editor asked them not to use the original characters but to design new ones based on them (Groth 97).

⁵⁹ Rorschach first makes this vow not to compromise as he is walking by a fence on which are painted the words *Krystalnacht* and part of the Juvenal quotation. Within *Watchmen*, *Krystalnacht* is the name of a popular band, but is only the first of many references to Nazi Germany, a state with its own millennialist leanings.

Yet, as we have seen, Rorschach is clearly meant to be more than the voice of doom. He is also meant to be the deity figure about whom that voice warns. Aside from his uncanny ability to suddenly appear and disappear, his emphasis on morality, or his vengeful disposition against those he judges sinners, there is another sign that Rorschach should be read as deity-like figure.

Moore uses a verbal tic throughout Watchmen which, while not universally true, frequently attaches words such as 'God' and 'Jesus' to the three deity characters of Rorschach, Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan. These words usually appear in exclamation form, as when a character is startled or bemused by one of the deity figures. The effect is that those exclamations sometimes appear to double as invocations, particularly since many of them occur in scenes when a character is pleading with one of these deity figures.

A good example occurs during Rorschach's surprise visit to Edgar Jacobi, a.k.a. Moloch.⁶⁰ (Appendix D, Fig. 17) The first words Moloch utters upon seeing Rorschach are 'Oh, **God**, please...' and this plea is repeated twice in succeeding panels as Rorschach advances on him. In two of the three panels, the word 'god' is in bold-face; in all three, and in most of the others in which he is pictured in this scene, Rorschach is bathed by a yellow light. The light is supposed to be from the open refrigerator but the effect is to give Rorschach a spectral, otherworldly glow. This same light, when it shines on Jacobi, reveals a terrified Moloch, often in a submissive posture (2:20-24).

The same techniques are used in Rorschach's second visit to Moloch when the submissive posture is even more in evidence. Taken by surprise and shoved into the

⁶⁰ The name Moloch is a curious choice. Within the story, a reference to the fire god to whom children were sacrificed makes little sense. However, since Watchmen is a work filled with Gods, and gods moreover whose morality is called into question, perhaps it should not be surprising that there would also be a criminal named for a god, yet another pagan deity to balance the Judeo-Christian one. Or perhaps Moore was thinking of Allen Ginsberg's use of Moloch as a symbol of an industrialized consciousness in his poem 'Howl'.

refrigerator by Rorschach, Moloch responds, ‘Oh, **God**...look, please, what do you **want** with me?’ (5:5) But the association between deity and Rorschach is even stronger in the final panels of this scene. As Rorschach threatens to shut Moloch in the refrigerator, Moloch pleads with him, ‘Oh no. Oh **no**, God, **don’t**...Rorschach, **please**, it wasn’t **me**’ (5:5).

As Rorschach lets Moloch out of the refrigerator, the panicked Jacobi falls prostrate to his knees before Rorschach, crying, ‘Oh god. Oh **God**....’ As Rorschach gives him final instructions, Jacobi says, ‘Yes. Ahhuhh. Oh, God, yes, anything...’ and remains in a prostrate position, head bowed in terror, as Rorschach exits (5:6). The supplicant/god relationship is obvious in these final panels of the scene, and once again Rorschach glows with an unearthly yellow light which, given the dialogue and postures, is suggestive of the terrifying aura of a god.

This same scene is played out during Rorschach’s capture. As the S.W.A.T. team goes in after Rorschach, various members of the team say the following: ‘Jeez, he better **be** here’; ‘Oh **God**, I’m **burning!**’; ‘Oh, Christ, what **happened?**’; ‘Oh, Jeez’; ‘Jesus **God**, my eyes!’ (5:26-27) Except for the first, all of these phrases are uttered after Rorschach has attacked the men who say the words.⁶¹ In some cases these men are also left in prostrate postures in relation to the figure they are referencing, again suggesting the angry, terrifying element of the Rorschach god figure, a characteristic which brings him in line with the

⁶¹ The Jesus references occur in Rorschach’s case during violent attacks and thus appear to be used ironically since it is clear that Rorschach represents the vengeful Lord and not the forgiving Christ.

wrathful aspect of the God of the Old Testament.⁶²

This pattern of linking the word 'god' with Rorschach occurs throughout the comic. As a child, Rorschach's prostitute mother discovers her son looking into her bedroom where she is with a customer and her first words are 'Oh, God...' (6:3).⁶³ In a scene in which Kovacs recalls his first violence against neighborhood bullies, the background comments from witnesses to his attack are 'Jesus Christ, willya lookit **that...**'; 'Oh, **God, look**, that filthy little **animal**'; 'Pull him **off**! For god's sake somebody pull him off **before...**' and from the boy he actually attacks, 'AAAAA! Oh, **God! No no no no no**' (6:7). In fact, almost all the instances where 'God' and Rorschach are linked verbally occur when a criminal is facing the retributive anger of Rorschach.⁶⁴ Perhaps most telling is the explanation of how the persona Rorschach was created, revealed during Kovacs's psychiatric examination. Kovacs experiences a series of violent and disturbing events in which it is increasingly apparent to him that human beings are depraved. There is his brutal treatment by his prostitute mother and by the boys in his neighborhood, then the infamous Kitty Genovese rape and murder in which witnesses did nothing to help, and finally the child kidnapping in which Rorschach learns that the child has been murdered, butchered and fed to dogs. This series of experiences - of victimization, apathy and murderous depravity -

⁶² Because the paneling is far more traditional in shape and sequentiality in Watchmen than Swamp Thing, closure usually takes one of the forms which McCloud discusses. However, one can see in the Moloch scenes how certain 'moods' can be evoked using these simpler forms of closure. In the first scene, aspect-to-aspect closure allows the reader to feel how physical Rorschach is with Moloch and also repeats the motif of the strange yellow light by casting it throughout the scene (2:21). In the second scene, the moment-to-moment closure is used comically, with the same effect as a double-take or a comedic beat (5:4). Finally, the combination of these kinds of closure in the scene where Rorschach discovers Moloch dead is used to produce suspense (5:24).

⁶³ The same scene is repeated with Kovacs' landlady, also a prostitute, who discovers Rorschach gathering his belongings after breaking out of jail. She cries, 'Oh God! I...It's...Oh God, what are you **doing** here?' (10:6) The little boy the landlady clutches to her looks exactly like the young Kovacs we've seen in the earlier flashback.

⁶⁴ Further examples occur in the news vendor's response to learning Rorschach has thrown hot grease at a fellow prisoner (8:3), and the interrogation scene (10:14).

are the pangs which accompany Rorschach's birth. As Rorschach stands considering the criminal who has butchered the child, he begins to take on the mantle of the unforgiving Old Testament Judge, and once more, the criminal is on his knees before Rorschach, uttering pleas for mercy: 'Oh, God, please...' and 'Oh, God. Oh, Jesus, No. You're **kidding**. You **have** to be kidding' (6:25).

Lit once again by the same unearthly glow, Rorschach watches the criminal's house burn in what is strikingly like a sacrificial fire and identifies this as the moment of transformation from Kovacs into a god-like figure who will exact the punishment from sinners which the absent real God does not.

Stood in firelight, sweltering. Bloodstain on chest like map of violent new continent. Felt cleansed. Felt dark planet turn under my feet and knew what cats know that makes them scream like babies in night. Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hell-bound as ourselves; go into oblivion. There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not Fate that butchers them or Destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us. Streets stank of fire. The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world. Was Rorschach. (6:26)

That the punishment Rorschach metes out is sometimes unfair only allies the Rorschach/god figure more closely with the God of the Old Testament who – if one takes the jaundiced view of Him - destroys his creation in a fit of pique, cruelly tests Abraham,

and mercilessly punishes Job. Moore reiterates this reading by using a quotation from Job as the epigraph of Chapter Seven.

One of the implications of Rorschach's monologue is that he is a man-made god since it is the series of events which he experiences as a human which *create* the Rorschach figure. This is a theme which is going to recur with the other deity figures of Watchmen and one to which I'll return later. For the moment, though, I want to turn to the second of Watchmen's deities, for the God of the Bible is not merely a wrathful destroyer, but is also a creator. And the God of the New Testament is a far more forgiving one than the God of the Old Testament.

If anyone in this text has a messiah complex it is surely Adrian Veidt, the former masked hero Ozymandias. It is he who is envisioned as the second deity-figure of the story. Where the reader is only privy to the destroyer aspect of the Old Testament god represented by Rorschach, in Veidt we get a more nuanced representation of deity. Here again, Moore conflates deities, or aspects of deities, into one character. In Adrian we can recognize three kinds of gods. He represents the 'positive' aspects of the Old Testament God with his emphasis on creating. Yet, for the reader, he is figured as an embodiment of the New Testament's Christ with his mild, forgiving nature and his messianic expectation of bringing salvation to mankind. However, Adrian figures *himself* as an embodiment of the Egyptian deity Rameses, and this association allows Moore to bring in the apocalyptic expectations of the ancient Egyptians to stand next to the millennial expectation which Adrian espouses. Indeed, because the Egyptian deity is the only one mentioned outright, and is therefore the overt deity to whom Adrian is connected, Moore effectively undermines Adrian's claim of

millennial goodwill with the more obvious eschatological impulse of the Egyptian godhead.

As Rorschach explains, standing in Adrian's deserted office:

Ancient pharaohs looked forward to end of world: believed cadavers would rise, reclaim hearts from golden jars. Must be currently holding breath with anticipation. Understand now why always mistrusted fascination with relics and dead kings...in final analysis, it's us or them. (10:20)⁶⁵

Appropriately enough, this exposure of the apocalyptic belief behind Adrian's persona is followed by Dan's, 'Oh shit' as he discovers Adrian's involvement in the story's misdeeds.

Nonetheless, because the Egyptian connection is only gradually revealed as the story progresses, the deity with whom Adrian at first appears most allied is the Judeo-Christian one. First of all, his creator aspect is emphasized. Much of what he creates is himself. He builds his own fortune from nothing after giving away his inheritance. He creates his own masked hero persona Ozymandias through 'the disciplines of physical exercise, meditation and study' ('After the Masquerade', 11:8). And he creates and carefully manages his own public image after his retirement through the production of items such as the Ozymandias dolls, self-actualization programs, and his numerous charitable actions and donations.

But Veidt has created other things besides his personal empire. He has created an Eden of sorts, a tropical paradise in the barren Antarctic wastes. The reader watches him destroy this perfect world in the same chapter in which we first learn of it, but that glimpse is enough to inform the reader of Veidt's, or rather Ozymandias', god-like capabilities. It is therefore no surprise that one of the only two places where the word 'miraculous' or

⁶⁵ Rorschach's line about the dead Egyptians holding their breath is not the only place where Moore makes fun of apocalyptists' breathless anticipation of the End and their ability to recalculate their predictions if need be. Earlier, Kovacs goes to collect his daily paper and assures the newsvendor that the world will end today. He then immediately asks the vendor to keep his paper for him the next day (3:3).

‘miracle’ is used in Watchmen is here at the moment that the edenic Vivarium is revealed (11:1).⁶⁶

Veidt has the words ‘Christ’ or ‘Jesus’ used in conjunction with his name or appearance numerous times. The first of these occurs with his secretary’s reaction to the attempted assassination (5:13). There is Dan’s incredulous comment to Rorschach that ‘this is Adrian, for God’s sake!’ (11:3), and later in the same chapter, ‘Christ, Adrian, what are you trying to **do**?’ (11:18). Upon learning of Adrian’s plan, Dan tells him, ‘Christ, you seriously **planned** all this mad scientist stuff?’ (11:26), and after Veidt has carried out his plan, a horrified Laurie says, ‘Jesus. He was **right**. All we did was fail to stop him saving **earth**. Jesus’ (12:20).

Just as Rorschach actually shines with a spectral light, Ozymandias is often lit by an unidentifiable yellow light, particularly in the final chapters. Veidt also makes repeated statements that he intends to bring back an ‘age of illumination’ (11:8). This supposed achievement of this goal is embodied in the illustration of Veidt’s moment of triumph when he raises his hands, yelling, ‘**I DID IT!**’ In this panel, a mysterious yellow spotlight shines on Veidt and partially illumines the portrait of Alexander in the background (12:19).

But Adrian’s association with godhead is achieved differently from that of either Rorschach or Dr. Manhattan. Though his deity status is occasionally referred to in an outright manner, such as when Doug Roth writes in his interview, ‘I have to goddamned admit that he looks like a goddamned god!’ his association is mostly achieved through his connection to Egyptian culture and the part it plays in the genesis of the Ozymandias persona (‘After the Masquerade’, 11:8).

⁶⁶ The other is in Jon’s reference to thermodynamic miracles (9:26), perhaps a reference to ‘the miracle’ of human life.

Veidt originally sets out to fashion himself after Alexander the Great who had ruled the ancient world and whose lateral thinking had allowed him to solve the puzzle of the Gordian knot. Later, however, he takes as his inspiration the ancient Egyptian pharaohs, adopting Rameses II as his model and surrounding himself with the trappings of ancient Egyptian culture. Since the pharaohs of Egypt were not just regarded as rulers but also as living gods, it is through this overt association that we are to understand Ozymandias as a deity figure.

There are, however, also definite parallels drawn between Ozymandias and Jesus.⁶⁷ Alexander, whom Ozymandias' originally seeks to emulate, is referred to as the 'judge of the dead' at one point. In Christian mythology, it is Christ who has this role during the Last Judgment. Similarly, Ozymandias' comment that 'I saved earth from **hell** and now I'll help her towards **utopia**' also aligns him with Christ's role in Revelation (12:20). Perhaps most significantly, in Veidt's confession to Jon that he has 'made [himself] **feel every death....I know** I've struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity...But **someone** had to take the weight of that awful, necessary crime', the reader identifies the martyr rhetoric associated with Christ's suffering for humanity in order to save it (12:27).

Additionally, Ozymandias has been associated with the New Testament god through a structural imitation of the Bible. Just as Christ appears in the second part of the Bible, Veidt too only becomes really visible as a character after Chapter Five in Watchmen. A second structural parallel is the division within the New Testament of the deity into the forgiving, healing Christ and the destroyer Judge of the Gospels and Book of Revelation. Adrian, too, is portrayed with these two sides: he is the creator of the Vivarium, but also its

⁶⁷ The Christian cross only occurs in two places in Watchmen. The most noticeable is along the wall in the chamber in Karnak from which the creature is transported to New York (11:5). The other is the barely noticeable crucifix hanging in Moloch's bedroom.

destroyer, for instance. Up until the moment that Ozymandias' full plan is revealed, he has been understood to be the kind, gentle God of the New Testament. He is, as Dan tells us, a pacifist who has never killed anyone (and a vegetarian besides). He gives his money away to charitable organizations, works to end famine, and even remains chaste. As the smartest man on earth, his insights seem supernatural in their ability to 'predict' the future and understand the information of the present. However, just as the God of the New Testament becomes a retributive god in the final book of the New Testament, so, too, does Ozymandias in the final chapters of Watchmen.

Further, if we look at the series of episodes which comprise Revelation – the Second Coming, Armageddon, Millennium, the last loosing of Satan, the destruction of the world, the Last Judgment, and New Jerusalem – it is remarkable how many of these have some comparable element in the Ozymandias plotline. There is, for example, a second coming of a different sort: Ozymandias imagines himself as a kind of Alexander the Great reborn. 'I was determined', he explains, 'to measure **my** success against [**Alexander's**]....I wanted to match his **accomplishment**, bringing an age of **illumination** to a benighted world' (11:8).

While there is no Armageddon-like battle in which Ozymandias participates, he is responsible for an analogous 'last loosing of Satan' in his teleporting of the monstrous life form he has created to New York. Veidt's description of this creature whose brain will broadcast a psychic pulse upon its death is certainly one with satanic overtones.⁶⁸

The brain was a psychic **resonator**. It would amplify a **signal pulse** and **broadcast** it, the signal triggered by the onset of death. We coded a lot of information into that signal. Terrible

⁶⁸ The jocular tone which is also present here implies that Moore is also making fun of comic book depictions of villains and their villainous plans. Watchmen is full of this kind of self-conscious joke, often simultaneously making fun of comic history, the superhero genre, his own reading constituency, and the biblical paradigms with which he is working.

information. Max Shea's descriptions of an alien **world**, **Hira Manish's** images and Linette Paley's **sounds**....Other than those killed outright by the shock, many will be driven mad by the sudden flood of grotesque **sensation**...and sensitives world-wide will have bad dreams for years to come. (12:10)

That this creature will die upon its arrival in New York is of no matter in this cartoonish last loosing of Satan. The simple existence of the satanic stand-in is hellish enough for Veidt's purposes.

Ozymandias is also responsible for ushering in Millennium, though in this case Millennium is a new line of perfume. This line of cosmetics will replace Nostalgia, as per Veidt's memo to his director of Veidt Cosmetic and Toiletries line. Nostalgia will be phased out. Millennium and 'the imagery associated with it will be controversial and modern, projecting a vision of a technological Utopia, a whole new universe of sensations and pleasures that is just within reach' ('Adrian Veidt's business correspondence, memo on Nostalgia line of cosmetics', 10). Veidt is also training 'martyrs' for his millennium with his Veidt method, a self-improvement program which seeks to produce people 'fit to inherit the challenging, promising, and often difficult world that awaits in our future' ('The Veidt Method', 10). Underneath the marketing for a better lifestyle, the Veidt method actually preaches the way to inherit the New Jerusalem.

As for the Last Judgment, the reader will recall that one of the first inklings we have that Ozymandias may not be the hero we've been led to believe occurs in Chapter Ten when, upon arriving in his Antarctic fortress, he is dressed and crowned by his servants and takes his seat on an Egyptian throne before his bank of television monitors. Just as Jesus' subjects come before his throne in Revelation, it is here in this throne that Ozymandias has the 'world' come before him and that he renders judgment on it. Before the monitors, Veidt's

tone distinctly becomes haughtier, more patriarchal, and more condescending. As he observes the Nite Owl and Rorschach approaching his fortress, he says:

Really getting even **this** far is a **breathtaking** effort, given their **limitations**. It must be so **disorientating**. Their pursuit leads them deeper into moral and intellectual regions as uncharted and devoid of landmark as the territories currently **surrounding** them. Of course, the ice they're **skating** on is **slippery**, and thinner than it **looks**. Let's hope they don't become too **reckless** and **overstep** themselves. Let's hope they know where to **stop**. (11:2)

From here it is a small step to the contemptuous, almost arrogant subject of the 'After the Masquerade' interview who refers to people as 'humanoids' and tells his fellow superheroes to 'grow up', that their 'school boy heroics are redundant' (12:16-7).⁶⁹

Finally, it is Ozymandias who is the architect of the New Jerusalem of Watchmen, 'an age of **illumination** so **dazzling** that humanity will reject the **darkness** in its heart' (12:17). He sees himself as the benevolent watcher in whose hands 'humanity's **fate** rested safely' (11:26). He is personally responsible for this new vision and New Jerusalem.

Because Moore's superheroes are also deity figures, he interrogates the idea of deity when he drops those characters into the real world of Watchmen. In a nod to the complexities of modern life, both Ozymandias and Rorschach are portrayed as doubting, anxious gods, rather than commandingly certain ones. They are self-aware and uncertain about their decisions in a way that is quite different from their Old Testament and New Testament progenitors. The voice of the biblical God is always a pronouncement; there is little hint of doubt, regret, or even thoughtfulness in God's dialogue or action. In

⁶⁹ Moore ensures the reader makes the connection with literary references to works such as Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias'. Rorschach's comment that they are 'approaching heart of darkness' alludes to Kurtz, the object of the quest and a man who believes himself to be a god (11:3). In Shelley's poem a great king has been brought low by time. Moore's use of 'Ozymandias' in particular suggests that Veidt's plan is ultimately doomed to failure.

Watchmen, however, the reader is privy to the keening of gods. In the orrery, Ozymandias confesses his ambivalence about the genocide he has orchestrated, telling Jon, 'I'd hoped you'd understand, unlike Rorschach...' (12:27).

But Rorschach does understand this predicament. In a line that is no doubt meant to comment on more than his dirty coat, he tells Dan, 'Apologies. Can't all be fastidious. Can't all keep hands clean' (10:9). Like his tortured journal entries, this comment indicates that Rorschach has willingly and knowingly taken on the responsibility of the 'dirty work' that must be done. Though neither hero reveals his anxieties in public, both suffer moments of doubt in private, and those doubts are revealing glimpses into Moore's de-construction of deity.

In a realistic setting, Moore implies, both Old and New Testament Gods would be compromised by the troubling intricacies of a post-Hiroshima world. In the realistic setting of Watchmen, both Rorschach and Ozymandias therefore occupy shifting moral ground; their actions are neither 'good' nor 'bad' but depend upon the shifting ends being achieved, as well as the vantage point of the viewer. Judgment of their actions is never a simple matter of morality; it is a matter of perspective. Says Moore:

...none of these characters are right or wrong....I didn't want to make any character the one who's right, the one whose viewpoint is the right viewpoint, the one who's the hero, the one who the readers are supposed to identify with, because that's not how life is; that's not how my life is. (Khoury 114)

There is a third deity in Watchmen, however, for whom morality has ceased to be an issue. Of the three gods in Watchmen, Dr. Manhattan (Jon Osterman) is the most god-like. His ability to manipulate matter at a molecular level means that he is omniscient, omnipotent

and omnipresent. He moves through time and space, seeing all moments simultaneously. Unlike his peers who are, to one degree or another, all associated with the nostalgic past, Dr. Manhattan is a deity associated with the future. His name alludes to the nuclear age which began with the Manhattan Project, and it is through Jon that many of the futuristic elements of Watchmen, such as the electric cars and blimps, are made possible.

While Dr. Manhattan's very characteristics are suggestive of deity, Moore has provided numerous other references throughout the novel to iterate this idea. As with the other two deity figures, Jon's name or appearance is often preceded or greeted with an interjection that invokes a deity. These references range from the Comedian's 'God help us **all**' as he notes that Jon is losing touch with humans (2:15), to Janey Slater's response when asked if she is afraid of him, 'No. Yes. Oh, **God**, Look, I....they say you can do **anything**, Jon. They say you're like **God** now' (4:11). When Jon hovers about a mob during the riots of 1977, someone in the crowd says, '**Look at him! Look at that freak! It's against God!**' and when Jon transports the crowd home, Laurie's only remark is 'Jesus' (4:22). Most striking is Dr. Manhattan's first materialization, prefaced by the awed comment, 'Oh, Holy God. Willya look at that...' (4:10). In this moment of materialization, Jon's pose also recalls the crucifixion. The analogous relationship to Christ is affirmed by another comment in response to Jon's disastrous television appearance: 'I've just been watchin' **Doc Manhattan** on T.V.! They just about **crucified** the poor guy' (3:17).

Many of these references come from Laurie in moments when Jon is acting or has acted in a most god-like way. When Jon transports them to the scene of the devastation in New York, Laurie says, '**Jon**, for Christ's sake! I want to be out of here, okay?' (12:8) But mostly her exclamations are made on Mars, where Jon's deity-like qualities are particularly

obvious.⁷⁰ Her first words after he transports her there are, ‘Oh **Jesus!** Jesus, Jon, you stupid bastard, you...’ (9:4). Later in the scene, Jon appears suddenly, startling Laurie into exclaiming, ‘AA! **Jesus**, Jon...’ (9:23). This scene echoes the previous chapter when Jon appears suddenly in Dan’s house to take Laurie to Mars. Her comments in that moment are particularly revealing:

Jon? Oh Jesus, I...I, I mean they said you’d **gone**. They said you were on **Mars**...God, **Yes**. Yes, I was just thinking...But Jon, how did you **know**? I need to **see** you, you **appear**...I mean, it’s all so *deus ex machina*.... (8:23)

There is also the essay ‘Dr. Manhattan: Super-powers and the Superpowers’. In addition to the previously mentioned ‘God exists, and he’s American’ comment, Prof. Milton Glass writes of ‘a feeling of intense and crushing religious terror’ at the thought of Dr. Manhattan. He refers to Dr. Manhattan as ‘a real live Deity’, and concludes his essay with the ominous warning that ‘The Gods now walk amongst us’ (‘Dr. Manhattan: Super-powers and the Superpowers’, 4).

But there are other methods by which Jon’s association with deity is indicated. There are visual clues such as the Buddhist posture Jon assumes as he creates his Martian palace, an image which is later tied to the Buddha himself through the poster of the Buddha in the same pose (4:26-27 and 5:7). A far more obvious visual connection appears in the

⁷⁰ Again, jokes such as this one simultaneously mock comic book tropes and the solemnity of the Bible, and could be read as another sign of the postmodern tone of Moore’s work: while he wants to make a serious point, Moore cannot bring himself to deliver it seriously.

final panels of the graphic novel when Jon walks on water, leaving behind the sleeping Dan and Laurie who are themselves replicating an iconic Adam and Eve image (12:25).⁷¹

Narrative juxtapositions suggest Jon's deity-status, as well. Contemplating the infinitely complex stars and their trajectories, Dr. Manhattan says that he is 'trying to give a name to the force that set them in motion' (4:2). Underneath, the chapter title 'Watchmaker' appears. (Appendix D, Fig. 18) Both Jon's words and the chapter title recall Paley's argument for the existence of God. More subtle are the opening images of this chapter in which we see Dr. Manhattan's footprints in the sand of Mars. Mary Stevenson's religious parable 'Footprints in the Sand' is one of the most frequently printed poems of faith in the twentieth century, and the image of Jon's footprints in the Martian sands is surely meant to recall it.

Finally, one of the primary functions of the 'Watchmaker' chapter seems to be to explain how Dr. Manhattan experiences time. It does this by overlaying panels illustrating Jon's memories with those of Dr. Manhattan who is musing about simultaneously experiencing other moments of time. Jon's sense of simultaneous time and place echoes the dislocation experienced by John in Revelation. The rapid scene-to-scene closure of the 'Watchmaker' chapter is the best example of Revelation-time being imitated in the text. The fact that Jon shares a name with the prophet of that holy Book may be seen as further evidence that he is a deity closely tied to apocalypse.⁷²

But Dr. Manhattan is also a representation of deity seen from a post-Hiroshima perspective. Here is a god who is beyond morality. So removed is he from the human race

⁷¹ The reference to Adam and Eve is enhanced because both have just made it clear that they regard themselves as survivors and therefore pioneers in a new world.

⁷² It is also another instance of the kind of conflation of apocalyptic roles which occurs in contemporary re-workings.

that he can no longer identify with them. In Vietnam, the Comedian tells Jon, ‘You don’t **really** give a **damn** about **human beings**....You’re driftin’ outta **touch**, Doc’ (2:15). Laurie notes the same thing; Jon is so involved in his exploration of the universe that he replicates himself to make love to her so that he will not have to leave his work in his laboratory.⁷³ Later, she tells Dan, ‘This world, the real world, to **him** it’s like walking through **mist**, and all the **people** are like **shadows**’ (3:9). This is a problem that even Dr. Manhattan has noticed. Thinking back on his crime-fighting methods he remarks, ‘The morality of my activities escapes me’ (4:14). His final link to humanity is broken when Laurie leaves him, and twice his relationship to humans is described by analogy as that of a human to an insect. While Laurie argues a moral imperative in saving the people of earth, Jon is incapable of thinking of humans in this way; he can only judge their value in terms of their uniqueness.

But this is another way in which Jon is a modern god. While the gods of the Old and New Testaments are to be obeyed without question, Jon presents a deity with whom one can have a rational conversation. He is a god who can be persuaded. A god one might dare to argue with, as Laurie does. A god who changes his mind. That is, like Rorschach and Ozymandias, Dr. Manhattan is not a *certain* god. He, too, exhibits doubt. When Laurie asks if it does not bother him to think of the extermination of humans, he answers:

All that pain and conflict **done** with? All that needless **suffering** over at **last**? No...No, that doesn’t bother me. All those generations of **struggle**, what **purpose** did they ever achieve? All that **effort**, and what did it ever **lead** to? (9:10)

This speech can be read in two ways. The first is in the cold, calculating voice of a scientist weighing up arguments for a procedure in which he has no emotional stake. This is

⁷³ Thus parodying the ‘negligent husband’ and ‘absent-minded scientist’ simultaneously.

certainly how Laurie reads the speech. But the phrasing and, more particularly, the questions contained in it are remarkably like those uttered by a suicidal person as rationale for taking his own life. And I think we are right to hear in Jon's words here the voice of a depressed god.

Ultimately then, by putting 'real' gods into 'real' settings Moore does more than just interrogate the deity figure. More accurately, he interrogates the human *envisioning* of deity. What Watchmen shows is how contradictory human ideas about godhead actually are. You want a God who punishes the unjust, Moore asks? Okay, but remember there is a thin line between retributive justice and vigilante justice. You want a god who will bring peace to mankind, he asks? Okay, but the price for that may be higher than you are willing to pay. You want an all-powerful god? How can you be sure that power would not be co-opted for political ends? You want an omniscient god? Okay, but don't be surprised if he finds you insignificant.

Dr. Manhattan epitomizes this quandary. In his depiction of Dr. Manhattan, Moore challenges the idea that such a god would have any interest at all in human beings. A god with the qualities which we ascribe to Dr. Manhattan (and by extension the Judeo-Christian god), might not be the benevolent, deeply-engaged god we have anthropomorphically envisioned for our comfort. Moore implies that quite the opposite might be true: that a creature with such an all-encompassing view of creation might be an absent god, one who finds scores of things as interesting and relevant as human life and one who would assign no teleological value to humanity at all. Such a god would be beyond human ideas of morality, and therefore beyond blame or praise.

But the fact that one can interpret Dr. Manhattan's comments as depressed as well as remote intimates that Moore also wants his reader to invert his usual anthropomorphic view and consider how a deity would feel about the modern world if indeed He *was* a benevolent god. How, Moore asks, would our creator god feel about us? By emphasizing the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' predicament in which Dr. Manhattan repeatedly finds himself, the author suggests that a modern deity would likely feel pained by the bellicosity of His creation, and would certainly feel confounded by them.

Thus, when Dr. Manhattan helps quell the riots in 1977, the rioters regard him as a freak and the newspapers vilify him for transporting the entire mob home, while the official response of the government he is helping is to ban superhero 'vigilantes' afterwards. In an effort to help his country, Dr. Manhattan wins the war, but simultaneously becomes both a military and propaganda tool of the government, a government which, because of his position on its side, abuses its power in the rest of the world. For his troubles, the world creeps closer to nuclear war and he remains in what is essentially self-imposed exile at a military installation. Because of his view of time and immortality, Dr. Manhattan is condemned in his personal life to love at the same time knowing (and experiencing), the loss of that love in the future. The conclusion he comes to is not judgmental but simply exhausted: 'I am tired of this world; these people. I am tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives....I'm gone' (4:25). For this sympathetically-drawn god, his own creation remains a puzzle. As Janey Slater tells him, 'Jon, you know how everything in this world fits together except **people**' (4:16). Any sensible god would walk away from such a painful Gordian knot, just as Jon walks away from Dan and Laurie before leaving earth forever.

In Dr. Manhattan, then, Moore addresses one of the pressing religious questions of the post-Hiroshima era: Has God abandoned us? This cry, so keenly articulated during the World War that Watchmen continually references, has haunted the twentieth century. Moore provides a raft of reasons to suggest why god might abandon us, if indeed he has. Rorschach's journal suggests the depravity of mankind is beyond repair: 'They could have followed in the footsteps of good men....Don't tell me they didn't have a choice' (1:1). The Ozymandias plotline suggests that even a god's best efforts to help will ultimately be foiled.⁷⁴ And in Dr. Manhattan, Moore presents a third and fourth option: first, that we are no more interesting or significant to Him, even in our uniqueness, than a scientific anomaly which must be studied dispassionately and categorized, and second, that we are so painful a creation we must be abandoned.

While Watchmen itself is an apocalyptic text for the superhero genre, destroying the old approach to superheroes and paving the way for a new approach to them, it is also clear that it functions as an apocalyptic text for the apocalyptic genre, setting out to destroy the old representations of deity and the powers of deity and replace those, too, with more contemporary ideas. One of the more extraordinary revisions which Moore makes in both the apocalyptic texts examined for this chapter is the proposition that Man creates God, and not the other way around.

⁷⁴ Moore implies the impermanence of Veidt's new world through a variety of means, ranging from comments by the detective that 'the way the world is today, I guess none o' these **messiahs** and **illuminated types** really **amounted** to a whole hill of **beans**' (5:22) to the meta-text of the pirate comic which doubles as editorial comment on the Ozymandias and his plot. The use of color schemes also suggest these ideas. For instance, a six-panel section of Veidt's observations is mostly rendered in a strict black-and-white scheme, suggesting something about the observer's flawed perspective (11:1). More telling, the garish coloring identified with the pirate comic turns up in the panels showing the devastation in New York and in Veidt's recollections of murdering Blake, suggesting the connection between the two fantasy worlds.

Indeed, all the gods in Watchmen and Swamp Thing are man-made. Like Dr. Manhattan, Swamp Thing and Woodrue become what they are because of their scientific work. Kovacs's session with his psychoanalyst reveals 'Rorschach' was created in response to human cruelty and neglect. Ozymandias is a man-made creation, or rather, he is self-created, a pun on which Moore has traded with the references to Veidt's self-help program. It is an accident of human science that turns Dr. Jon Osterman into Dr. Manhattan, and though he must feel his way into the deity role, shedding clothes, then illusions about his shared humanity, and finally his emotional attachment to the world, it is humans who act as his guides through his transformation, until, in his final confrontation with Ozymandias, Dr. Manhattan leaves Jon Osterman behind forever and speaks with the voice of god.⁷⁵

I've walked across the sun. I've seen events so tiny and so fast they hardly can be said to have occurred at **all**, but **you**...you are a **man**....And this world's **smartest** man means no more to me than does its smartest **termite**. (12:18)

In fact, in Dr. Manhattan's assertion that he has become so interested in human beings that he thinks he will go create some, Moore implies an Ouroborosian view of the cosmos.⁷⁶ Because he is a man who becomes a god who creates men who presumably repeat the process, Dr. Manhattan can be read as a version of Ouroboros, the serpent who swallows its own tail. His final comment 'Nothing **ever** ends' confirms such a reading. Like the yin/yang symbol in Swamp Thing, Ouroboros symbolizes the cyclic nature of the universe, that 'all is one'. An allusion to the symbol would mark the return to cyclical time

⁷⁵ Swamp Thing's evolution is much the same as Jon's.

⁷⁶ Jon's comment echoes that of Mark Twain's Young Satan, who, asked if he does not regret destroying the little mud people he brought to life, replies 'Oh, it is no matter, we can make more'(52). Twain's The Chronicle of Young Satan (which later became No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger) is usually considered an example of a nineteenth century apocalyptic narrative.

adopted by many contemporary authors of apocalyptic stories, and affirm the contention in Swamp Thing that good and evil are part of a whole in which their qualities are both opposed and reconciled.⁷⁷

Watchmen suggests it is Man who is the creator and thus Man who assumes the deity's characteristics, a view Adrian Veidt endorses when he declares we all have god-like abilities within us. Alan Moore is living proof of this argument. As the author of Swamp Thing and Watchmen, he, too, is a Creator, one who creates the deities who populate his apocalyptic tales. Moore's proposition that it is Men who are the Deity-figures is evident not just in the fact that Watchmen's 'gods' are all man-made, having been created by the graphic novel's population of humans (as, indeed, the *graphic novel's* deity figures are created by another man, the author), but also in elements of the story such as the 'Tales of the Black Freighter' meta-narrative in which the evil which occurs issues solely through the minds of men and their suspicions. We are, Moore intimates, both the issuers of evil times and deeds, and the creators of new, better worlds.

Moore obviously believes it is no small thing to be such a creator. It may be the only thing that really does make us unique. Watchmen's Laurie certainly thinks so, for in her discussion with Jon she uses the creativity of mankind as an argument for saving the world, telling him, 'Jon, in **those** terms, sure, mankind hasn't **helped** the **environment**, but **against** that you have to measure the lives of **artists, scientists, poets...**' (9:13). Moore implies that it may be, finally, that our creativity is the thing that makes us most worthy of being saved, and this depiction of art as the 'saving grace' of humankind is one which will recur with the other authors in this study.

⁷⁷ That this symbol occurred in Alexandrian Egypt, and was also taken up by Christians (Gnostic) as a symbol, suggests at least two other interesting connections between Ouroboros and the plot of Watchmen.

**Blue-footed Boobies and Other Witnesses to the End:
Kurt Vonnegut's Change of Heart**

No contemporary American author has done more to bring the End of the World to the attention of his readership than Kurt Vonnegut. In addition to the prominent place that eschatological plots have in his work, the gloomy Vonnegut has spoken often and at length about his sense of impending catastrophe as regards human survival. Surprisingly, while he bases much of that pessimism on the proliferation of war, and nuclear arms in particular, none of his novels locate the eschatological agent in nuclear war. Neither, as a writer of science fiction, has he often relied on extraterrestrials to deliver the *coup de grâce*. But as befits an author who began his career as a public relations writer for the General Electric laboratories, Vonnegut has given other earthly sciences prominent roles in the apocalyptic destruction in his novels.

Throughout his career, Vonnegut has balanced an admiration for scientists and their pursuit of knowledge with a cynicism and angry despair about the ways scientific discoveries are misused. At the heart of this ambivalence is his own experience:

I thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked, and then make it work better. I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientist, maybe my brother, would have taken a color photograph of God Almighty - and sold it to *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Scientific truth was going to make us *so* happy and comfortable.

What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there. And I had just come home from being a prisoner of war in Dresden, which I'd seen burned to the ground. And the world was just then learning how ghastly the German extermination camps had been. So I had a heart-to-heart talk with myself.

(Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon 155-6)

His first novel, Player Piano (1952), reflects this ambivalence. Depicting a world in which the engineers have become the privileged class and the machines they build and tend have made humans nearly obsolete, Player Piano chronicles an unsuccessful anti-machine uprising. In part, the rebellion is unsuccessful because the very humans who are being superseded are themselves ambivalent about machines. Vonnegut shows the mob (which has previously gone on a machine-destroying rampage), watching, rapt, as a mechanic repairs an orange juice dispenser. When the machine begins dispensing again, they murmur in excitement and approval.

Even in this early novel, Vonnegut makes it clear that there is an apocalyptic sensibility at work. There is a great deal of talk amongst the fomenters of the rebellion about prophets and messiahs, and the rebellion itself is instigated by a religious minister who declares himself ‘an enemy of the Devil, a man of God!’ (280) He tells protagonist Paul Proteus:

In the past, in a situation like this, if Messiahs showed up with credible, dramatic messages of hope, they often set off powerful physical and spiritual revolutions in the face of terrific odds. If a Messiah shows up now with a good, solid, startling message, and if he keeps out of the hands of the police, he can set off a revolution – maybe one big enough to take the world away from the machines, Doctor, and give it back to the people. (246)

The link which Vonnegut first articulates in this novel between science and technology and the impending End is one to which he returns throughout his writing career, though, paradoxically, and unlike writers such as Thomas Pynchon or Peter George (whose 1958 novel Two Hours to Doom was the basis for the film *Dr. Strangelove*), Vonnegut

steers away from depictions of a catastrophic end brought about by war technologies. Instead, his Endings usually take the form of some other science, scientific principle, or technology gone wrong.¹

With one notable exception, his pessimistic view of mankind has also meant that most of his apocalyptic novels have fallen into the neo-apocalyptic category in which the End is final and no New Jerusalem is imagined. Late in his life and career, however, Vonnegut had a seeming change of heart and, in Galápagos, wrote a traditionally apocalyptic novel which does depict a New Jerusalem.

Prior to Galápagos Vonnegut wrote two other major apocalyptic works, Cat's Cradle (1963) and Slapstick (1976), but his other novels are often influenced by apocalyptic sensibilities too, even if they are not primarily about eschatological events. Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) revolves around Billy Pilgrim who time-travels between the planet Tralfamadore and his experiences as a prisoner of war. Pilgrim, whose name itself suggests the apocalyptic roots of the American Pilgrims, becomes a kind of prophet figure in the novel who knows that the universe will end when a Tralfamadorian pilot, experimenting with a new rocket fuel, accidentally blows it up. In addition to the depiction of World War II as a sort of apocalyptic experience in which Pilgrim's 'world' - both the literal world of Dresden and the more figurative 'world' of Billy's mind - is destroyed, Slaughterhouse-Five also makes use of the kind of narrative time slippage typical of the Book of Revelation: because of his time traveling, Billy is simultaneously in the future and past, and this knowledge of the simultaneity of all moments is exactly the message he wants to pass on to his followers. Moreover, the novel contains references to the messiah Jesus (78-8; 143; 147-

¹ His agents of Ending include the collapse of gravity (Slapstick), disease (Slapstick and Galápagos), experiments with fuels that go wrong (Slaughterhouse-Five), experiments for fun that go wrong (Cat's Cradle), and evolution (Galápagos).

8), to expectations of World War III (42), and to Sodom and Gomorrah (16), whose story, in addition to functioning as a biblical analogy to the firebombing of Dresden, also has apocalyptic connotations.²

Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle is probably the best known example of the 'science gone amok' subgenre of eschatological fiction in which man is responsible for his own destruction, with Karel Capek's R.U.R. (1921) and The Absolute at Large (1922), Ward Moore's Greener Than You Think (1947), John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids (1951), John Bowen's After the Rain (1959), Brian Aldiss' Greybeard (1964), and Piers Anthony's Rings of Ice (1974) as other notable examples.

In his study of eschatological fictions, W. Warren Wagar points out there are few examples of this sort of plot prior to 1914 and suggests that the appearance of this subgenre at the turn of the century may be in response to 'the powerfully eschatological thrust of nineteenth-century socialism and anarchism' as well as a simultaneously growing awareness of technological advances in the field of applied sciences (108). That 'man-made dooms are the rule, not the exception' after 1914 would also seem to suggest that the man-made devastation of the First World War had a profound influence on the apocalyptic imagination (108). While Wagar concludes that the majority of the stories which use the trope of man destroying himself take the form of world war stories, he notes that 'science-gone-amok' stories began to occupy a significant niche in the subgenre after 1965 (110), and continue to be a popular alternative. More recently, advances in genetic engineering have inspired a new

² Vonnegut's other novels are also strewn with such eschatological asides. Even his 1990 novel about the Socialist Eugene Debs Hartke, Hocus Pocus, begins with such sentiments: 'If all had gone the way a lot of people thought it would, Jesus Christ would have been among us again, and the American flag would have been planted on Venus and Mars...At least the World will end, an event anticipated with great joy by many. It will end very soon, but not in the year 2000, which has come and gone' (1). Vonnegut refers to this joyous anticipation of the end in Galápagos, as well, when he quotes Shakespeare's line "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd' as a coda for a section on the eagerness of humans to use their high explosives (155).

twist in the plots, with Michel Houellebecq's Atomised and Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake as notable examples.³

Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle (1963) is an early example of this trend. Its plot involves a man-made substance called Ice-9 which instantaneously freezes the world's water and causes massive weather upheaval. Human extinction is ensured by the days of tornadoes and the fatal ingestion of Ice-9 crystals. Vonnegut makes no suggestion that there is a new or better world to be inherited. If anything, Cat's Cradle is Vonnegut's bleakest apocalyptic work, ending as it does with the novel's religious figure, Bokonon, essentially declaring the futility of existence and advising his followers to commit suicide.

Vonnegut's other major apocalyptic work prior to Galápagos is Slapstick or Lonesome No More! While Slapstick is one of this author's least successful endeavors and does not stand up well to critical scrutiny, it is of interest here because it has as a major plot element the depopulation of the planet. Vonnegut employs almost every agent of apocalyptic end he can think of to account for the depopulation. Humans are simultaneously wiped out by the Albanian flu, a plague called the 'Green Death', and the literally earth-shaking fluctuation in gravity. Since it is later revealed that the Albanian flu is really a Martian invasion, that the 'Green Death' is really the technologically-advanced Chinese who have made themselves microscopic and are fatally inhaled or ingested, and that the fluctuations in gravity may also be due to Chinese experimentation, we can see Vonnegut using practically every existing trope of Ending, whether alien invasion, the proliferation of life-destroying

³ In Atomised, traditional reproduction and the human society it represents is eradicated in favor of hermaphroditic clones. In Oryx and Crake, the human species is almost completely wiped out by a deliberately engineered plague.

technology, or natural forces.⁴ Like Cat's Cradle, Slapstick belongs to the neo-apocalyptic line of apocalyptic fiction: while there are survivors of all these catastrophes, the novel itself is a pessimistic one and offers little which might be interpreted as a New Jerusalem. Its importance for my purposes lies in the fact that it is the first time that Vonnegut uses the trope of fatal disease as a vehicle of the End.

He will use this trope to better effect in Galápagos where he imagines an outbreak of bacteria that sterilizes the human race and prevents it from reproducing. Vonnegut combines this idea with his longstanding interest in Darwin's theory of natural selection to produce his only apocalyptic work that could be said to use the traditional paradigm. In Galápagos, the author strands a little group of individuals on an isolated island, thereby ensuring their escape from the sterility-causing bacteria, and lets evolution work on them over the course of a million years. Hence, the novel has precedents in two other strains of eschatological fiction: plague fictions and evolutionary fictions.

Mary Shelley's The Last Man (1826) is one of the earliest examples of 'universal' plague fiction; others include Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842), Jack London's 'The Scarlet Plague' (1912), and George R. Stewart's Earth Abides (1949). The plague fiction continues to grip the contemporary apocalyptic imagination.⁵ Michael Crichton's Andromeda Strain (1969) and Stephen King's The Stand (1978) both rely on the trope, for instance, while numerous films have used a fatal outbreak of disease as the basis

⁴ One assumes, because of the title, that Slapstick is actually Vonnegut's attempt to satirize something, but both because the novel is poorly executed and the depopulation seems nearly incidental to the narrative, it is impossible to be certain that the apocalyptic genre is his target. If it is a burlesque, it is not a terribly successful one.

⁵ As pestilence is one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the use of the plague trope in the apocalyptic genre is unsurprising.

of their plots: *Omega Man* (1971), *Outbreak* (1995), *12 Monkeys* (1995), and *28 Days Later* (2002).

Eschatological fictions which detail the natural extinction of humans are examples of what John Wiley Nelson has called 'evolutionary humanism', the idea that '*Homo sapiens* has reached the end of its time: the species is evolving into a new form of existence' (167). Usually such a plot has the human race overcome by a better-adapted species, with Nature portrayed as hostile rather than nurturing (Wagar 100). Here, however, Vonnegut turns the trope on its head, portraying the evolutionary process as wise and ultimately benevolent. In Galápagos, Natural Selection becomes the hero of the story.

Vonnegut attempts something unique in this novel, pitting social Darwinism, with its notions of hierarchy, progress and generalized 'survival of the fittest', against Darwin's morally neutral biological theory of evolution. Inherent in this endeavor is a challenge to a whole tradition of eschatological plotting which relies on Herbert Spencer's phrase 'survival of the fittest'. The misapplication of the notion of competition between individuals and groups spawned numerous tales in which the 'fitter' alien species overcomes the human species, or in which one race of humans exterminates another. We might think of H.G. Wells's The War of the Worlds (1898) or The Time Machine (1894) as variations on this theme. Galápagos does nothing so clearly as undermine notions of social Darwinism and return the focus to the science of Darwin's theory of natural selection.

Vonnegut is acutely aware of how the ideas of Darwin and Spencer ultimately 'gave

the age metaphorical plots of triumph, or growth, or progress' (Mellard 10).⁶ Vonnegut's criticism of the kind of social Darwinism which views 'society and the economy as a competitive arena in which the "fittest" would rise to the top' and which '[conflates] social success with reproductive fitness...and questions of moral rightness with matters of a supposed "natural order"' occurs throughout his various novels (Honderich 829). But in Galápagos Vonnegut has juxtaposed this misused interpretation of evolutionary theory against the actual science on which the theory is based to deliberately undercut the way Darwin's science has been used to justify intolerant and demeaning social ideas.

Vonnegut, who enrolled in the University of Chicago's Masters programme in anthropology when he returned home from World War II, has a longstanding interest in Darwin.⁷ He has remained an avid student of cultural anthropology and natural history throughout his life, claiming to have read almost all that Darwin has written, and thus is also familiar with the more recent neo-Darwinian theory (Reed, 'A Conversation' 13). But Vonnegut sees Darwinism as more than an explanation of man's evolutionary origins. He views it as a kind of master narrative, an idea he elaborated on in an interview with Peter J. Reed:

...it's interesting to me that this is the only theory of evolution and the only thing that modern man has to cling to, I think, as an idea that has been generated by science and that modern man can understand and build his life around and all that. It has been a substitute for the Bible for a lot of people who have been willing to find it reasonable to put their faith in a theory of evolution and

⁶ In her book Darwin's Plots, Gillian Beer examines The Origin of Species as a narrative, how Darwin's familiarity with certain narratives influenced it, and how his theory in turn affected the subsequent narratives of his Victorian peers. Darwin himself disbelieved the notions of 'higher' or 'lower' life forms which his Victorians peers adopted. But because the vernacular meaning of 'evolution' in Darwin's time was tied to the concept of progress, Darwin's carefully chosen phrase 'descent with modification' ended up associated with 'evolution' (Gould, Ever Since Darwin 35-6).

⁷ Vonnegut did not complete the program but was subsequently awarded his Masters degree years later when the school accepted his novel Cat's Cradle in lieu of a Master's thesis.

call it God. Everybody has to put his faith somewhere, and it turns out this is the major receptacle in our civilization for faith.
(‘A Conversation’ 13)

It is clear that Vonnegut is particularly dismayed by how the theory of biological evolution has been adopted into a form of social Darwinism which he detests and disdains (Reed, ‘God Bless You, Mr. Darwin, for Kurt Vonnegut’s Latest’ 63). Yet either because Vonnegut himself is sometimes imprecise with words in his off-the-cuff comments and personal writings, or because, in his written efforts to satirize social Darwinism, his ironic tone is easily missed, he sometimes appears guilty of conflating the two strains of Darwinian thought, as he does, for example, in his essay on the 1972 Republican National Convention. Writing that America has only two real political parties, the Winners and the Losers, he notes:

The single religion of the Winners is a harsh interpretation of *Darwinism*, which argues that it is the will of the universe that only the fittest should survive. The most pitiless Darwinists are attracted to the Republican party, which regularly purges itself of suspected *bleeding hearts*....The Winners are rehearsing for *Things to Come*. (Wampeters 174-5)

Occasionally, such imprecision occurs in his fiction, too. In Slaughterhouse-Five, the Tralfamadorians find Charles Darwin the most engaging Earthling because he ‘taught that those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements’ (154). In Slapstick, two characters ‘criticized Darwin’s Theory of Evolution...on the grounds the creatures would become terribly vulnerable while attempting to improve themselves....They would be eaten up by more practical animals, before their wonderful new features could be refined’ (49).⁸

⁸ This is such an obviously incorrect misrepresentation of Darwin’s theory that one suspects it is deliberately ironic, but as I noted earlier, Slapstick is not a well-executed joke.

Galápagos, however, largely avoids criticism about this conflation because its author has delineated his ideas more carefully for this novel than he seems to have done in his personal interviews.⁹ Galápagos' entire aim is to pit one strain of Darwinism against the other in order to undermine any notions of Darwinism other than those that belong to the evolutionary biology. Thus, it is a structurally necessary decision to be sure the reader separates the two strains.

In one of the few academic readings of the novel, Peter Freese, who has been an exceptionally astute reader of the author's work, does an excellent job of analyzing Vonnegut's seemingly contradictory positions on evolutionary theory in Galápagos. Freese, a clear admirer of Vonnegut's work, tends to give the author the benefit of the doubt when he appears to confuse kinds of Darwinism, arguing instead that the author is deliberately constructing a 'metafictional moral' ('Natural Selection' 354). Even when Vonnegut has his facts wrong, as Freese points out he does during the passage in the novel in which he explains the effect of Darwin's The Origin of Species, Freese still prefers to believe that this confusion is deliberate and satirical (347-8).¹⁰

While it is likely that Freese is correct in this assessment, we cannot be absolutely certain. Vonnegut is not always a scrupulous or punctilious writer, and his earlier references to Darwin and Darwinian theory outside the context of this novel mean we must consider the possibility that we are dealing with an author who either confuses strains of Darwinism

⁹ Yet, in the introduction Vonnegut wrote for the Franklin Library Edition of the book, he writes, 'Only the Theory of Evolution carried a seeming message to which human beings without scientific apparatus might respond at any time, if they were so inclined: "Prove by fucking or killing that you are Nature's favorite. Never mind mere human law."' An earlier draft of this line is even more conflated: 'prove by fucking or fighting your [sic] fittest to survive. Nature is gratified when a weakling is prevented from reproducing' (Draft of introduction included with a letter to his agent, dated 15 June 1985. The Vonnegut archive. Lilly Library. University of Indiana, Bloomington. Box 6, folder 4).

¹⁰ Cf. Bo Pettersson who argues that Freese 'overlooks the deterministic motif in Vonnegut's oeuvre in general and this novel in particular' (352).

when it suits his fictional purposes, or who is not a rigorous analyst of his own words and thoughts. However, having acknowledged the discrepancy between the careless conflation of types of Darwinism in his personal remarks, his more disciplined approach in the novel does suggest that his intent is to satirize the social Darwinism he detests, and hence it is possible to admire Galápagos' unique place within contemporary apocalyptic fiction and endorse Vonnegut's assessment that it is his best book (Fates Worse than Death 131).

Because Galápagos has both a deity and a New Jerusalem, and because it is essentially optimistic in outlook, Vonnegut has stayed truer to the original plot and spirit of the traditional apocalyptic genre than almost any other contemporary writer who has adapted the paradigm. But what makes Galápagos exceptional is that in elevating a scientific principle to the position of deity in his novel Vonnegut returns the secular apocalyptic story to its religious roots.

One of the abiding difficulties of writing in the apocalyptic genre is that it is a theological story, difficult to translate into secular terms because so many of its unique characteristics are inherently religious concepts. But as Vonnegut well knows, for many people science and rationalism have abrogated religious faith; science has become a faith in itself. His last apocalyptic novel is therefore based on a canny paradox: by making the scientific theory of evolution his apocalyptic god he returns the secular apocalyptic story to its religious roots by transforming *into* the deity the very thing which tore it away from those roots. Todd F. Davis' argument that Vonnegut's work consistently strives to undermine America's grand narratives - primarily that 'the truth of science will save us' - cannot be said to apply to Galápagos, in which this trend is reversed; the scientific 'truth' of the

mechanism of Natural Selection ultimately saves the day here ('Apocalyptic Grumbling' 152n).

As evidenced by his comment to Martin Amis that Darwinism is 'our only alternative to conventional religion', Vonnegut believes that Darwinian theory has become a great ideology of our age (Amis 134). It is also clear that he conceives of social Darwinism, with its racist, vicious nonsense, as having consequently become a grand narrative of our time, and aims in *Galápagos* to undermine it. But as a reader of natural history and anthropology Vonnegut also knows that parts of the biological theory have been superseded by advances in the field of evolutionary biology.¹¹

Cognizant, then, of 'sorts of myths' which Niles Eldredge and Ian Tattersall argue surround 'modern stories and attitudes about the origin and nature of our own biological species' (1), Vonnegut targets both the grand narrative of 'survival of the fittest' (the lynchpin of social Darwinism), and the grand ideology of biological Darwinism which he believes has become a kind of modern religion, attacking the former as spurious and amending the latter by incorporating more recent ideas in biological evolution about the part played by chance.

That he chooses to attack this ideology in the form of an apocalyptic tale suggests that Umberto Eco's argument that the drive towards modern apocalypticism is fueled in part by the collapse of great ideologies may have some merit (David 177). For it seems clear that Vonnegut also believes that biological Darwinism – at least as most of us understand it – is a collapsing ideology. New theories have been advanced by Neo-Darwinists such as

¹¹ Specifically, Vonnegut seems interested in the 'punctuated equilibrium theory', a 1972 theory proposed by Stephen J. Gould and Niles Eldredge which observed that, contrary to Darwin's belief that evolution moved in a slow and continuous process, evolution actually occurred in sudden starts, with long periods of equilibrium 'punctuated' by sudden radical changes (Heylighen).

Stephen J. Gould and Niles Eldredge that abandon parts of Darwin's theory for alternative explanations that synthesize advances in other sciences such as genetics into a larger evolutionary theory of our origins. One area in particular, Darwin's 'imperfections in the geological record,' has undergone revision in the last several decades. Vonnegut explains:

The fossil record doesn't quite bear out what Darwin said. [Stephen J.] Gould has been telling his colleagues, 'Come on, let's see what the fossil record really does show and then explain that,' instead of saying 'We're still missing links; we've got to dig some more.' What the record shows is that changes [in evolutionary development] are quite sudden. New models have all suddenly appeared in fossils, rather than with a whole lot of easy, rather imperceptible steps. (Nuwer 252)

In Galápagos, these sudden evolutionary leaps are made possible because of luck.

For example, the sequence of events that brings together the small band of colonists who get stranded on Santa Rosalia is a matter of pure chance.¹² Ultimately, this emphasis on luck undermines any notion of the survival of the fittest. In fact, the 'fittest' specimens in the novel - at least according to social Darwinian thought - are all dead before the stranding occurs. James Wait, Andrew MacIntosh, and Zenji Hiroguchis, each a highly 'successful' individual in social Darwinian terms, all meet early ends, and simply through bad luck, too, one having suffered a heart attack, and the others having been attacked by a mentally deranged soldier for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thus, it is not the 'fittest' who arrive on Santa Rosalia, just the luckiest. Vonnegut's narrator, Leon Trout, makes this

¹² There is an ironic friction between the randomness within Vonnegut's *fictional* world, and his own artistic world in which the choices he makes as a writer are *not* arbitrary at all, but are carefully chosen to make a point about contingency being the driving force in the universe.

explicit: 'I did not know that humanity was about to be diminished to a tiny point, by luck, and then, again by luck, permitted to expand again' (103).¹³

Consequently, Galápagos addresses Darwinist ideas on two separate counts. First, it undermines social Darwinist ideas simply through its reliance on contingency rather than talent, skill, or strength. As Peter Freese points out, 'such a depiction convincingly demonstrates that in a universe based on "pure gambling-casino luck" it is not the fit that survive for good reasons but only the lucky that survive for no reason at all' ('Natural Selection' 350).

Secondly it redresses an outdated interpretation of evolutionary theory which aligns it with Victorian notions of progress, and with teleological pre-Darwinian notions of a hierarchy of life forms culminating in humans, a conceited perspective which Vonnegut once acerbically described in the following way:

It's just like elephants being proud of weighing as much as they do. Yes, we've huge brains, and so what? This is certainly a glory of creation: it created Auschwitz, created the Roman games, created crucifixion as a punishment. We should send this out to the world and into the rest of the universe? It's ridiculous to think that we are the peak of evolution, that evolution has tried to produce such terrible farts as we are. (Abádi-Nagy 17)

In fact, modern evolutionary science makes a point of removing this bias towards hierarchical evolution, preferring to talk about 'speciation' instead. Hence, the notion of contingency is actually a fitting one as far as neo-Darwinian thought is concerned since modern biological evolutionary theory emphasizes random mutation and sudden change.

¹³ The ghostly Leon has just slipped into Captain von Kleist's head when he makes this comment and emphasizes that this choice, too, was simply lucky: 'My choosing the Captain's head for a vehicle, then, was the equivalent of putting a coin in a slot machine in an enormous gambling casino, and hitting a jackpot right away' (103).

Vonnegut, in fact, has been most proud of the fact that Stephen J. Gould wrote to congratulate him on Galápagos and its scientifically reputable choice of a mutation involving the fur-covered baby Akiko: 'He thought it was a wonderful *roman à clef* about evolutionary theory and also proves how random the selection is' (Nuwer 252).¹⁴

Thematically and structurally, Galápagos is a complex book. It has multiple satirical targets, an unusual plot structure, and an even stranger narrative strategy. These elements eventually cohere, but not until the concluding pages of the novel, and so a little background is necessary on each of these topics to see how Vonnegut has ultimately knit his theme together.

For the apotheosis of Evolution to work, Vonnegut first needs to establish an analogy between science and religion. He accomplishes this principally by drawing analogies between the *Bahía de Darwin*, the ship that carries the colonists to Santa Rosalia, and Noah's ark.¹⁵ In the opening pages of the novel, Leon declares that he 'might entitle my story "A Second Noah's Ark"' (13). Vonnegut strengthens this comparison by later having the Captain sarcastically tell Mary that he believes Mount Ararat to be nearby (201).

¹⁴ Attempts to verify this letter from Gould at the Vonnegut Archives held at the University of Indiana, Bloomington failed to turn up the letter itself. However, I did find a second reference to Vonnegut having received it. In a March 5, 1987 letter to Donald M. Fiene, with whom Vonnegut had a long correspondence, Vonnegut wrote: 'I was glad to learn of Gould's mentioning Cat's Cradle. We tend to like each other. We're both primitives, it seems to me, Grandma Moses of the intellect. He came to hear me lecture at M.I.T. a couple of years ago, and we had supper afterwards. I was scared shitless of what he might say about GALAPAGOS, and didn't ask his opinion. But he dropped me a note, asying (sic) it was pretty good science, and that fur-covered human mutant is fairly common (sic)' (Vonnegut, Kurt. Letter to Donald M. Fiene. 5 March, 1987. Kurt Vonnegut Archive. Lilly Library, University of Indiana, Bloomington). See Appendix E for more on the archives.

¹⁵ Vonnegut's repeated references to this cruise liner as the second Noah's ark, as well as his references to the work of Herman Melville, suggest he is familiar with and wants to encourage the metaphor of the ship as a microcosm of the world.

Furthermore, this analogy establishes Galápagos as a story in the biblical apocalyptic tradition, since the story of the Flood is the first instance in the Bible of an apocalypse.¹⁶

A second analogy between the Bible and Galápagos is found in the repeated allusions made to Adam and Eve when Captain von Kleist and Mary are mentioned. The author makes it clear that this is not a strict analogy; as one might expect with Vonnegut, the Captain and Mary offer a twisted version of the Genesis story with Mary literally unable to bear children, and the Captain casting away Mandarax, the metaphorical 'Apple of Knowledge into the deep blue sea' (56). However, figuratively, the couple do function as the parents of the future human race.¹⁷

Finally, Vonnegut suggests an analogous relationship between science and religion through his list of explanations for the existence of the Galápagos Islands. Leon tells us that in 1986 it was still a mystery how so many creatures came to be living on such a remote group of islands. He offers five explanations that people have devised in order to explain this mystery, three of them scientific, and two religious (12-13). Leon goes on to refute all of the scientific explanations, but neither of the religious ones. In fact, when Leon says, 'If there really was a Noah's ark, and there may have been – I might entitle my story "A Second Noah's Ark"', his phrase 'and there may have been' actually hints at the plausibility of the

¹⁶ Cf. Freese who argues that these references set Galápagos apart from its Biblical counterpart ('Natural Selection' 345).

¹⁷ Critics such as Leonard Mustazza have read Galápagos as a return-to-Eden story, rather than an apocalyptic one, largely based on the numerous references to the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve in the novel. Indeed, the interpretive movement backwards to prelapsarian innocence is logical in that there is an analogous evolutionary regression from big brains to small ones. Yet it appears that Vonnegut wants to undermine such a reading since Kilgore Trout speaks of the Garden of Eden only to disabuse his son of the notion, and Vonnegut contradicts Mary's assessment of the forest where she meets her husband as an Edenic place by first describing it in terms of ownership, and later by declaring that the bird the couple are expecting to see is extinct. Furthermore, Vonnegut deliberately undermines the notion of a new Adam and Eve when he writes that Mary, the figurative 'mother' of the new race, is no longer ovulating and 'would not, could not, become his Eve. So she had to be more like a god instead' (47).

religious explanations. Since he purports to be writing the story of a second Noah's Ark, he is clearly drawing an analogy between his tale in which Natural Selection is the deity and the biblical version with the traditional Judeo-Christian deity, and he wants the reader to understand his implication that science has come to be seen as a sort of religion.

Vonnegut reiterates this link when Mary's dying husband sends her to get the copy of the Bible in their house and she finds it with two other books, Darwin's The Voyage of the Beagle and Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities. The religious text is put on an equal footing, therefore, with the scientific text which is the basis for our scientific 'religion', and the third literary text, interestingly, has a different connection altogether to both the apocalyptic tradition and to the idea of social Darwinism. The French Revolution, of course, was itself regarded as an apocalyptic event which would overturn world order, but the ending of A Tale of Two Cities could also be interpreted as undermining ideas of social Darwinism. It involves an act of altruism on the part of Sydney Carton, who takes the place of Charles Darnay at the guillotine, foregoing his own chance to perpetuate his line (because he also loves Darnay's wife Lucy), and opting instead for being remembered as the one who made Charles and Lucy's own biological heirs possible. Since altruism is one argument used to counteract social Darwinism, one might argue that Vonnegut is subversively using Dickens's work to further undermine the social Darwinist strain.¹⁸

Once Vonnegut has established that he is positioning science here as a religion, he can then move on to establish Galápagos as an apocalyptic tale. One of the more remarkable features of the novel is how it manages to incorporate many of the original features of

¹⁸ Dickens also describes Carton's last thoughts as prophetic. Thus the act of altruism Carton imagines as he goes to his death is also tied to prophecy, and specifically apocalyptic prophecy since Carton thinks, 'I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss' (Dickens 366).

Apocalypse, including a deity, an Antichrist figure, and a depiction of time fluctuation that imitates the Book of Revelation's.

Darwin deliberately refrained from anthropomorphizing nature, but he also contended that natural selection 'is the creative force of evolution – not just the executioner of the unfit' (Gould, Ever Since Darwin 12). So while his theory clashed with the Natural Theology of his day, the various efforts of the Victorians to tie Natural Selection to ideas of progress and design inevitably suggest an anthropomorphosis of the evolutionary process (Bowler 208). Given this history, it is not a huge leap for Vonnegut to choose evolution as his novel's deity figure.

Vonnegut repeatedly reminds his reader that Evolution is responsible for all the creation in the novel. So often is Nature alluded to as a wise presence and ontological explanation that the analogy to traditional deity is hard to miss.¹⁹ Early in the narrative, as Trout is describing the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands, he comments, 'Quite a lot of volcanic activity still goes on. I make a joke: The gods are still angry' (42). This is the only place Vonnegut overtly makes this connection between Nature and God for his reader, but the link is implicit throughout the rest of the narrative. When Leon says he is 'prepared to swear under oath that the Law of Natural Selection did the repair job without outside assistance of any kind' (234), we hear both a disavowal of the supernatural, as it has traditionally been depicted in religious doctrine, *and*, by virtue of its allusion to similar invocations to the supernatural, an elevation of the Law of Natural Selection to exactly that position.

But while Nature is portrayed as the *prima causa*, it is not necessarily depicted as a conscious one. John Wiley Nelson has pointed out that the typical naturalistic eschatology

¹⁹ Vonnegut indulges his own anthropomorphism of natural selection here.

depicts 'Mother Nature [smashing] an impertinent offspring's attempts to usurp Her Throne' (165). Galápagos definitely sees humans attempt to usurp Mother Nature, as illustrated by Mary's reproductive experiment, her nickname of 'Mother Nature Personified', and Vonnegut's comment that drinking is our attempt to push evolution in the right direction. Nonetheless, I would suggest that in Vonnegut we have an author who makes more nuanced delineations since Nelson's wording implies a conscious deity aware of rebellion, and one of Vonnegut's points seems to be that Nature does not differentiate between people, iguanas, and seaweed.

By using evolution as his deity, Vonnegut ties his novel to the traditional paradigm in yet another way. Because evolution happens in chronological time, Vonnegut does not sidestep the issue of time as a linear structure that is so imperative in the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. Rather, his prescription for living with the End is trying to *connect* with history (Dewey, In a Dark Time 79). To Vonnegut, evolution is a series of events which connect all things equally, privileging no one species over another. In this chain of sequences, Vonnegut attempts to put human life and culture in its proper anthropological context: we are, he argues, egotistic, narcissistic tiny links of a much longer chain of historical evolution and there is no reason to privilege humans and their achievements any more than the Blue-footed Booby and its mating dance, or a bacterial infection which causes population-wide sterility. Each is just another element in a long historical narrative, and none is of more importance in that narrative than the other.²⁰ Vonnegut draws links between evolution and history by providing the evolutionary lineages of various items such as the

²⁰ While the *structure* of time itself is clearly linear as in the Judeo-Christian paradigm, the *narrative representation of time* also echoes the Book of Revelation because it moves back and forth across time with Leon speaking from a million years in the future, then popping into various moments of the 'present tense' of his main story, and even going back into the characters' pasts to narrate the events which culminate in Galápagos.

computer Mandarax and the explosive dagonite. He uses the biblical language of ‘begetting’ and the rhetorical flourishes associated with royal lineage as a further sign of this connection: ‘Glacco begat dagonite...and both were descendants of Greek fire and gunpowder and dynamite and cordite and TNT’ or ‘...dagonite, son of glacco, direct descendant of noble dynamite’ (172-3).²¹ This link between evolution and linear history, though tenuous, is one more way that Galápagos resonates with the original apocalyptic paradigm.

I say ‘tenuous’ because modern evolutionary biology has largely jettisoned the notion of linear evolution: ‘Evolution is a mixture of chance and necessity – chance at the level of variation, necessity in the working of selection’ (Gould, Ever Since Darwin 12). Throughout the novel, Vonnegut has emphasized the role of random chance and luck in evolution. Darwin, too, wrote of the role of random mutations in evolution. Vonnegut stays true to that theory when he writes that Akiko had a furry pelt due to her grandmother’s exposure to the atomic bomb. This is a random mutation. But it is a series of *chance* events that put Akiko’s mother Hisako on the *Bahía de Darwin*. Once this mutation occurs, it is encouraged by evolutionary forces because the new environment favors the further development of this adaptation, but the fact that this particular mutation arrived on the island is pure chance, just as it is pure chance that the Captain, a non-carrier of the Huntington’s chorea gene, ends up on the island instead of his brother.

The chance events which occur throughout Galápagos do not, as it first appears, undermine evolutionary theory. Instead, they emphasize a change in thinking in evolutionary

²¹ An internet search revealed no explosives called glacco or dagonite. However, Dagon was a Philistine deity, a fish god sometimes depicted as half-man, half-fish. Vonnegut may have created the name ‘dagonite’ as a pun on the evolutionary process which is turning humans into ‘fisherpeople’ who do share certain physical similarities with fish. The reference to ‘noble dynamite’, on the other hand, is surely a pun on Alfred Nobel who invented dynamite in 1866 and after whom the Nobel Prize is named.

biology. While Darwin theorized random mutations, he also believed that if we could only find the missing fossil links we would be able to piece together a complete lineage showing how each species evolved from the next in a single line and how all life was ultimately traceable back to a single source. The more recent ‘punctuated equilibrium’ theory suggests there are no ‘missing links’ to find and that, in fact, there are multiple branching lines rather than a single straight line of evolution. We know now, for instance, that several types of hominids lived simultaneously over the past two to three million years, suggesting that they are not descended from one another, but branched out simultaneously from a more distant, common ancestor. Only one of those hominids, *Homo sapiens*, survives today. Those other branches have since become extinct, but why is not clear. This suggests another element of randomness in evolution: random, sudden extinctions. Why does one species survive and another die off? Sometimes a species cannot adapt to a change in the environment, but at other times, a chance event causes extinctions, too. Vonnegut wants to remind the reader of this chance element when he writes of the meteorite showers which killed off the dinosaurs (104) or rodent-plagued land tortoises (132). The sterilizing bacteria of Galápagos are another example of a rapid extinction brought about purely by chance.

This element of chance and random luck at first appears problematic in an apocalyptic story because it suggests that the deity is not in control; however, I’m going to argue in Vonnegut’s case that he uses this seeming paradox as part of a deliberate satirical strategy. In order to talk about that problem, we first have to examine how Vonnegut has positioned the Big Brain as his Antichrist figure.

Vonnegut is clear from the very start of Galápagos that big brains are the source of all the trouble. It is not merely that they are ‘too big to be practical’ (70), but ‘brains back

then were so big that they could actually deceive their owners' (75). Throughout the novel, big brains are increasingly anthropomorphized; they not only act of their own accord, independent of the human beings they are part of, but they are willfully malicious. Leon says of Captain Kleist: 'His brain had a life of its own, and the time would come when he would actually try to fire it for having misled him' (189). 'If [big brains] had told the truth', says Leon, 'then I could see some point in everybody's having one. But these things lied all the time!' (141)²² Numerous examples of the duplicitous nature of big brains are given, including Leon's own:

When I was alive, I often received advice from my own big brain which, in terms of my own survival, or the survival of the human race, for that matter, can be charitably described as questionable. Example: It had me join the United States Marines and go fight in Vietnam. Thanks a lot, big brain. (31)

Leon makes it a point to emphasize how big brains are responsible for dubious 'survival schemes' such as mass mechanization, slavery, the destruction of the environment, rabid capitalism, and genocide, commenting that human brains had become such 'irresponsible generators of suggestions as to what might be done with life' that survival of the species finally appears to be an 'arbitrary [game] which might be played by narrow enthusiasts – like poker or polo or the bond market, or the writing of science fiction novels'

²² Vonnegut's depiction of the big brain satirizes the pervasive tendency to anthropomorphize evolutionary functions, a tendency which is still evident today. Here, for example, is scientist and professor of economics Robin Hanson who also takes up the metaphor of dishonesty to describe genetic function: 'Of course genes are not actually intelligent, in the sense of basing their actions on computations that they run. But since they act as though they were intelligent, they act a lot like the cruel slave masters they would be if they *were* intelligent. Our genes do not care whether we experience more pleasure than pain. Our genes only care that we anticipate both possibilities, so that they can control us via our preference for pleasure over pain. When our bodies are no longer capable of reproducing, or capable of helping those who share our genes reproduce, our genes literally do not care if we live or die. Our genes will happily shorten our lives, or give us great pain, if that will help those genes to reproduce. Our genes will also lie to us to promote their goals, for example, by making us think that our happiness depends more on our success than it really does. Our genes can indeed be cruel masters' (34-5).

(67-8). It is not merely the bad ideas which affect society that Vonnegut criticizes here, but also the bad ideas which affect the individual. Referring to a man who enjoys being asphyxiated to the point of orgasm, Leon comments wryly, 'His big brain had had him doing this at least once a month for the past three years: hiring strangers to tie him up and strangle him just a little bit. What a survival scheme!' (134)

But Vonnegut goes even further with his anthropomorphism. He assigns malicious intent to the big brain, saying that human beings are generally helpless to resist the power of their big brains because brains are so seductive and duplicitous. Referring to Thoreau's aphorism about men leading lives of quiet desperation, Leon says:

And why was quiet desperation such a widespread malady back then, and especially among men? Yet again I trot onstage the only real villain in my story: the oversize human brain....The mass of men was quietly desperate...because the infernal computers inside their skulls were incapable of restraint or idleness; were forever demanding more challenging problems which life could not provide. (216)

This explanation is soon dramatized for the reader. When Mary Hepburn has an idle thought about a way to reproduce without the help of a man, she finds herself carrying out this experiment even though she does not have the permission of either the male donor or the young women she will make pregnant.²³

...what her big brain certainly wasn't going to tell her, was that, if she came up with an idea for a novel experiment which had a chance of working, her big brain would make her life a hell until she had actually performed that experiment.

That...was the most diabolical aspect of those old-time big brains: They would tell their owners, in effect, 'Here is a crazy

²³ Mary's name, in addition to alluding to the biblical mother of God, is also the pun on 'marry'. As a biology teacher who is nicknamed Mother Nature Personified, Mary 'marries' the concepts of science and nature.

thing we could actually do, probably, but we would never do it, of course. It's just fun to think about.'

And then, as though in trances, the people would really do it...
(213)

The outright reference to the oversized brain as a villain with an ability to make one's life hell and the further proposal that the big brain has a will of its own suggest that the big brain is supposed to personify the Antichrist figure in this novel. Vonnegut's repeated references to the malicious trouble caused by big brains and their 'evil schemes' (16) confirm that interpretation: 'more and more people were saying that their brains were irresponsible, unreliable, hideously dangerous, wholly unrealistic – were simply no damn good' (28). Early in the novel, when Mary is considering suicide, she actually says to her own brain, 'You are my enemy. Why would I want to carry such a terrible enemy inside me?' (28), and even the Vonnegut persona asks near the beginning of the novel,

What source was there back then, save for our over-elaborate nervous circuitry, for the evils we were seeing or hearing about simply everywhere? My answer: There was no other source. This was a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains.
(16)²⁴

Moreover, Vonnegut's strategy here allows another analogous connection to the Book of Revelation. By making it clear that big brains are responsible for cruel and stupid ideas such as social Darwinism which cause so much misery, Vonnegut ties his figurative Antichrist to a figurative Tribulation. Thus, while the evil ideas of big brains are not responsible ultimately for the extinction of the human race in Vonnegut's tale, they *are* responsible for making this world a hell in which to live. That is, the evil ideas of the

²⁴ Here is another instance of Vonnegut's sometimes confused and confusing conflation of evolutionary ideas. Throughout the novel, Nature is described as an indifferent agent. Yet here Vonnegut uses the word 'innocent', undermining his own depiction of Nature as morally neutral.

villainous big brain form the analogous Tribulation element of Vonnegut's apocalyptic story.

Both the physical and thematic structure of Galápagos reflects this juxtaposition. In what seems at first to be an odd choice, Vonnegut uses Anne Frank's most famous saying as his novel's epigraph. Frank's remark that she still believes in the goodness of people seems both literally and figuratively out of place in Galápagos, since the novel is only incidentally about morality at all. If anything, Galápagos' deity is a seemingly neutral one. But what the Frank quotation does allude to is perhaps the most vivid example we have of an experiment in social Darwinism. The Nazis' Final Solution has roots both in social Darwinist ideas about superior species and competition, and apocalyptic notions inherent in the New World Order. That Vonnegut chooses to begin Galápagos with a reminder of the Nazis' handiwork suggests that he wants to keep this idea before the reader's eyes. At the same time, there could be no stronger proof of the misery big brains can cause than the Holocaust. Thus, Vonnegut does not seem to intend Frank's remark to illumine his novel's deity, only his Antichrist and the related idea of Tribulation. To this end, the quotation works in several ways.

First, it refers to an event that many consider to be a real near-apocalypse: the annihilation of European Jewry, and Vonnegut strengthens that meaning by alluding several times to another prominent genocide, that of the Indians by the Conquistadors. At the heart of the European genocide lies the most extreme extrapolation of social Darwinism, a re-figured version of the same notions of superiority which account for the Indian genocide. Secondly, the quotation contemporizes the idea of apocalypse, taking it out of the realm of the Biblical/hypothetical and placing it instead in the realm of the political/possible. In her

work on contemporary apocalyptic fiction, Lois Parkinson Zamora notes that this shift towards the historical is part of the secularization of apocalypse, writing, 'Our modern sense of apocalypse is less religious than historical, the cataclysm resulting from the events of recent history and man's own capacities for self-destruction' (The Apocalyptic Vision in America 1). By referring to a historical moment in which a segment of population and its culture was almost completely destroyed and a millennialist New World Order nearly put into place, Vonnegut implies that secular apocalypse is not some distant, theological theory which has little to do with us, but has become all too plausible.

The juxtaposition is also reflected in the novel's physical structure. The novel is divided into two sections, 'The Thing Was' and 'And the Thing Became'. The two section titles imply that 'the Thing' *has* a Before and an After, but additionally suggest an evolution from one to the other through the use of the word 'Became'.²⁵ This inherent link of the section titles to the idea of evolution, as well as the novel title Galápagos referring to the islands which partially led Darwin to his theory, aligns the body of the novel with Darwin's biological evolutionary theory. The epigraph, however, is aligned with social Darwinism. Hence, the juxtaposition of the epigraph against the rest of the novel structure manages to convey a précis of Galápagos' theme: social Darwinism leads to a 'Tribulation'; biological Darwinism leads to a New Jerusalem.

By aligning natural selection with the deity role and the big brain with the Antichrist role, however, Vonnegut creates a problematic dichotomy. He has to deal somehow with the fact that it is natural selection that has created the big brain to begin with. His solution is

²⁵ The section titles also intimate that the narrator is narrating from a time beyond the End, the classic position of most narrators in eschatological stories. He is a witness, if not a survivor, of the End, rather than a prophet of it.

to remove the big brain from its place in the natural order.²⁶ He repeatedly implies that while the big brain might have originally served a useful purpose in, for instance, allowing greater manual dexterity, its secondary use, as an organ of thought, has long since caused the big brain to fall out of line in the natural order of things. Its primary use is paradoxically being undermined by its secondary use.²⁷ David Cowart identifies this reversal as frequently occurring in Vonnegut's later fiction where 'mindless (or rather mentally twisted) human predation is merely Darwinian mechanism gone malign, promoting ecological catastrophe rather than orderly evolution' ('Culture and Anarchy' 183).

Vonnegut is certainly aware that there is scientific precedent for his position; he deliberately mentions the Irish Elk whose massive horns puzzled Victorian naturalists since they seemed to serve no beneficial purpose and were possibly disadvantageous because they prevented the elk from feeding in any but the most open of habitats. Darwin's theory says that evolutionary changes must be adaptive and useful, that 'natural selection will never produce in a being any structure more injurious than beneficial to that being, for natural

²⁶ Citing Darwin's notebooks, Gould has argued that Darwin delayed releasing *The Origin of Species* for twenty years not because he believed his views on evolution would be seen as heretical, but because he worried that his implied philosophical materialism would be seen as heretical. 'No notion could be more upsetting to the deepest traditions of Western thought,' Gould writes, 'than the statement that mind – however complex and powerful – is simply a product of brain' (*Ever Since Darwin* 24). Without materialism, he argues, an evolutionist could still believe in a Christian god who worked 'by evolution instead of creation', but Darwin's materialism suggested the heretical question 'if mind has no real existence beyond the brain, can God be anything more than an illusion invented by an illusion?' (25) This argument has interesting resonances in *Galápagos* because of the body/mind split imagined there (an issue which recurs in *The Matrix*), as well as Vonnegut's eventual undermining of religion in general in the novel. See Gould's essay 'Darwin's Delay' in *Ever Since Darwin*.

²⁷ As early as 1973 Vonnegut was quoted saying as much: 'our brains are two-bit computers, and we can't get very high-grade truths out of them....The human brain is too high-powered to have many practical uses in this particular universe, in my opinion' (*Wampeters* 214 and 219).

selection acts solely by and for the good of each' (254).²⁸ But Vonnegut is relying here on more recent biological evolutionary theory which adds a codicil to Darwin: 'Darwinian evolution decrees that no animal shall actively develop a harmful structure, but it offers no guarantee that useful structures will continue to be adaptive in changed circumstances' (Gould, Ever Since Darwin 90). He is also playing with the idea that while adaptations may develop to better help an animal compete in a certain area, adaptations may serve secondary and tertiary functions which have nothing to do with the reason for the original evolution.²⁹

Vonnegut subverts the teleological Victorian reading of the natural world which interpreted man and his big brain as the pinnacle of evolution, and instead offers 'proof' of the amended Darwinian theory by claiming that the human brain is one such outdated adaptation. He illustrates that theory in scenes such as the one in which Leon describes how the castaways manage to board a ship from which the gangplanks and anchor ropes have fallen away. Leon says we ought not to applaud ingenuity such as this since humans 'wouldn't have had to behave so resourcefully, wouldn't have been in such complicated difficulties, if the planet hadn't been made virtually uninhabitable by the creations and activities of other people's great big brains' (168).³⁰

²⁸ Darwin did theorize that such weird adaptations might have more to do with sexual selection, however. In his essay on the Irish Elk, Gould argues a variation of this idea, saying that modern animal behavior studies suggest that the horns are examples of what Valerius Geist calls 'visual dominance-rank symbols' whose 'function is to prevent actual battle (with consequent injuries and loss of life) by establishing hierarchies of dominance that males can easily recognize' (Ever Since Darwin 89).

²⁹ One wonders, too, whether Friedrich Engels' 1876 essay (published posthumously 1896) 'The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man' might have influenced Vonnegut here since Stephen Gould quotes from Engels in his own essay on this topic and Vonnegut claims to have read a great deal of Gould's work (Nuwer 252). In his essay, Engels questioned the privileging of the brain over the hand, claiming that it was a result of a social prejudice of professional intellectuals against the laboring masses, and argued that the dexterous hand preceded the development of the larger brain (qtd. in Gould, Ever Since Darwin 212).

³⁰ The interpretation of evolution as the heroic deity of the story is in part dependent on whether one believes the sincerity of the mediating voice of Leon Trout. While this voice is clearly a sarcastic and angry one, there is no reason not to believe it is earnest, and in fact, I would argue that part of Vonnegut's strategy of having a narrator at a space of a million years is to appear to invest that voice with the objectivity of 'distance'.

But if the oversized brain is supposed to be the Antichrist of this novel, two crises arise almost immediately. The first is a crisis of theodicy and the second is a crisis of fallibility, since the figurative Creator in the novel, Evolution, is also inadvertently responsible for the ‘mistake’ of creating evil in the form of the big brain. However, neither of these crises is new to religious studies; the existence of evil has always been problematic for Judeo-Christian theologians. That these two issues are consequences of the dichotomy which Vonnegut devises in his novel strengthens, rather than weakens, the analogy that science is meant to be taken as a sort of religion here.

Peter Freese, who has interpreted Vonnegut’s novels as attempts to create a new religion suggests that ‘any attempt at a theodicy...is bound to fail’ because ‘a religion in Vonnegut’s sense is essentially a “*heartfelt moral code*” and ‘must not endeavor to explain the inexplicable workings of a contingent universe, but concentrate on the provision of rules for human behavior’ (‘Vonnegut’s Invented Religions’ 162, emphasis Freese’s).³¹ Yet Vonnegut’s choice of deity here has some intriguing consequences of its own as regards the traditionally difficult religious issues of fallibility and theodicy.

One theological response to the issue of theodicy is that we cannot know or understand God’s will, a solution that implies both the brevity and inconsequentiality of human life in the larger cosmos. But Vonnegut’s narrative *allows* an expanded view of the cosmos because it takes place over such an enormous period of time.

³¹ Galápagos suggests two alternatives to organized religion. One is humor, and the other is dancing, a recurring motif throughout the novel. Not only does half of Mary’s biology class believe the dance done by the blue-footed booby is ‘proof that animals worshipped God’ (90), but Mary also asks them, ‘Dare we call it “religion”?’ (92).

Vonnegut appears to have been unusually aware of potential problems with the narration for this novel and, indeed, he struggled to find a narrative strategy that would allow him to do what he wanted:

The technical problems were very hard of how to make a story last a million years. Who's going to observe it [the point of view], because the reader is going to insist upon knowing who the hell is watching this. As an atheist I couldn't have God watch. So technically, it looked hopeless for a long time. The problems were enormous as to how the hell to get away with this. (Nuwer 251)

Vonnegut solved his problem by making his narrator a ghost. Thus, Leon Trout occupies a narrative position much like John of Patmos in that he is simultaneously in the future looking back, and in the present describing what he observes. He is emblematic both of humans as they are now, since he has not evolved like the rest of the species, and of humans as they will be, since, ironically, he too has a reduced brain capacity, having been decapitated before beginning his tale.³²

This unusual narrative strategy allows Vonnegut the one thing which potentially solves the problem of theodicy inherent in Western religion: time. Leon's narration from a million years into the future of human existence allows Vonnegut the time to have people evolve into a kinder, gentler form, but the secondary effect of the length of time over which Leon makes his observations is the implication that we are simply incapable of making

³² Vonnegut may be alluding to Nathaniel Hawthorne's humorous use of the trope in 'The Custom-House', the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, to represent his dismissal from his post after the 1848 election. As a 'decapitated Surveyor' he, too, is a kind of headless, ghost-narrator (Hawthorne 1365-7).

accurate assessments of anything because we are not around long enough to do so.³³ If it seems to us that there is evil in the world that is incomprehensible in light of our vision of God as benevolent, this is merely because we do not have the necessary time to see how things turn out. But here, as a consequence of the deity that Vonnegut has created, the reader is given that extended perspective and hence the ability to see that all has worked out for the best.³⁴ The creation of the big brain is thus neither proof of Nature's fallibility nor of its lack of benevolence.

Yet, there is a second way to read the issue of fallibility in the novel and that is with the knowledge of Vonnegut's own atheism and history as a satirical writer. In such a reading, theodicy and fallibility remain problematic as they always have been in religions, but the issue of fallibility allows Vonnegut an opportunity to *satirize* religion.

That Evolution has made a 'mistake' in creating the big brain is an idea that Vonnegut certainly wants the reader to consider, and there are passages in which it is manifestly clear that he is gleefully painting a portrait of a God who has lost control of Its creation. Leon, for instance, says, 'Even at this late date, I am still full of rage at a natural order which would have permitted the evolution of something as distracting and irrelevant and disruptive as those great big brains of a million years ago' (141).³⁵ Leon is given a number of these speeches, normally focused on the indifferent cruelty and bellicosity of

³³ Darwin wrote, 'The mind cannot possibly grasp the full meaning of the term of even a million years; it cannot add up and perceive the full effects of many slight variations, accumulated during an almost infinite number of generations' (659). Gould says something similar when asked about Endtime: 'We're not very good at calculating probabilities. When it comes to concepts like the infinite or eternity, we are completely incapable, we haven't the faintest notion....Since we can't imagine how phenomena originated, we talk about eternity. Since we can't conceive of space having an end, we talk about infinity. But we don't really understand what that means' (David 25).

³⁴ Vonnegut's solution is not without its problems, though, since the novel assumes that Natural Selection *stops* once the newer version of small-brained humans has evolved. Evolution does not stop at this point simply because Vonnegut chooses to, as Freese points out ('Natural Selection' 353).

³⁵ Vonnegut points out that big brains do not *need* to be a problem necessarily. The octopus, he reasons, has just as large a brain, developed for exactly the same purpose, and yet it lives in harmony with Nature. The octopus's brain isn't undermining the octopus as a species (150).

humans. Marveling at the destructive capabilities of an elaborate new weapon, he says, ‘the Law of Natural Selection was powerless to respond to such new technologies....The best that the Law of Natural Selection could come up with in my time was somebody who wasn’t afraid of anything, even though there was so much to fear’ (120).

There are several reasons to believe that Vonnegut’s aim here is ultimately to criticize religion. First, he has a history of doing so. As Peter Freese has noted, this is an author ‘who scathingly comments on almost every organized religion from traditional Catholicism to the more recent Born-Againism’ (‘Vonnegut’s Invented Religions’ 146). And, too, Vonnegut has been outspoken about his own atheism. In any number of essays and interviews, he has characteristically stated his belief that humans are alone in the universe. Making comic reference to failed portents in a 1974 speech, Vonnegut said, ‘I take it to mean that we can expect no spectacular miracles from the heavens, that the problems of ordinary human beings will have to be solved by ordinary human beings’ (Palm Sunday 194). Over a decade later, he repeats this idea in an interview when asked about his apocalyptic works, explaining, ‘it’s a way of saying God doesn’t care what becomes of us, and neither does Nature, so we’d better care. We’re all there is to care’ (Abádi-Nagy 25).³⁶

That stance has often spilled over into his novels as well, and Galápagos is no exception. It is contingency rather than design that is emphasized here, implying that Natural Selection is no more in control than any other force. The Santa Rosalia colony is a sure example of this since it is not Natural Selection that ensures the survival of the human race, but Mary’s biology experiment (Freese, ‘Natural Selection’ 353).³⁷

³⁶ For other examples of Vonnegut’s declared atheism, see Abádi-Nagy (18) and Vonnegut’s ‘Address at Bennington College, 1970’ in Wampeters (157-8).

³⁷ This is a problematic example, since it is Mary’s big brain – the supposed mistake – which ensures the experiment, though Mary’s presence on the island is due to contingency.

Yet a third reason to suspect that Vonnegut is satirizing religion is the repeated reference to the volatility of, and mistaken weight given to, human opinion.³⁸ One of the less marvelous consequences of a having a big brain, Vonnegut points out, is our susceptibility to being ‘beguiled by mysteries’ (11). Throughout Galápagos, he suggests that opinion is fickle and based less on fact than ‘magical’ transformation (23), a phrase he uses in his description of how people’s opinions of the Galápagos Islands changed after Darwin’s theory. He writes:

Darwin did not change the islands, but only people’s opinion of them. That was how important mere opinions used to be back in the era of great big brains. Mere opinions, in fact, were as likely to govern people’s actions as hard evidence, and were subject to sudden reversals as hard evidence could never be. (22)

In addition to the early speech Leon gives about the explanations of the origins of the Islands, he makes several comments that link unreliable opinion and our scientific knowledge. He remarks how Darwin’s theory greatly influenced ‘people’s volatile opinions of how to identify success or failure’ (20),³⁹ and that, because of opinion, ‘the Galápagos Islands could be hell in one moment and heaven in the next...and the universe could be created by God Almighty in one moment and by a big explosion in the next’ (22). Here, Vonnegut implies that our modern ‘religion’ of science is as influenced by the realm of fantasy as our creative impulses are, and since we are meant to interpret science as a religion, it seems a fair supposition to make that Vonnegut means to undermine religion here in the same way he does throughout the rest of his *oeuvre*.

³⁸ Darwin’s philosophical materialism has interesting repercussions here.

³⁹ Another instance of conflating social and biological Darwinism. Chapter three provides several examples of this kind of problematic conflation.

Regardless of how one interprets Vonnegut's stance on the fallibility of his novel's deity, the reader knows early on in the novel that evolution is going to make things right.⁴⁰ Leon tells us in the opening pages that big brains are no longer a problem at the time in which he is writing the story. Remarking that humans are vastly different now, he tells the reader:

It is hard to imagine anybody's torturing anybody nowadays. How could you even capture somebody you wanted to torture with just your flippers and your mouth? How could you even stage a manhunt, now that people can swim so fast and stay underwater for so long? The person you were after would not only look pretty much like everybody else, but could also be hiding out at any depth practically anywhere. (118-19)

What is not necessarily clear until the last pages of the novel is how the reader should interpret this evolution of the species. Is it the End of humankind, or is it, in fact, a New Jerusalem? Part of the difficulty in interpreting this ending, even though we know about it from the beginning of the novel, is that Vonnegut is also toying with the idea of human beings as deity figures.

While Leon explicitly makes this connection for the reader when he notes that Mary Hepburn had 'to be more like a god' than an Eve (47), Vonnegut implicitly refers to this human tendency throughout the novel. No scene makes the point more clearly than Mary's experiment with single sex reproduction. She impregnates the uncomprehending Kanka-bono girls with the semen left inside her own body after having sex with Captain Kleist. This is not a harmless experiment in creation, as Vonnegut makes clear in two ways. First, the Kanka-bono women and their children 'feared [Mary]...believing her capable of doing great evil as well as good,' so that, in their eyes, she has indeed taken on a godlike stature,

⁴⁰ Thus, it is not science (in this case evolution), which gets things wrong, but *scientists*.

but in no particularly good way (225). More importantly, Mary herself recognizes that what she has done is illegal and immoral when she jokes that back in civilization she would be in prison for doing it (214).

Ultimately, Vonnegut will clarify that such hubristic behavior is exactly the problem with the species: our big brains have been usurping God's role, preventing us from accepting our rightful place in nature. Humans, according to Vonnegut, have ludicrous aspirations that they pursue at the risk of their own survival. Thinking themselves god-like is perhaps the worst of the bad ideas their over-sized brains devise. Big brains delude humans into thinking themselves godlike, and yet they are utterly careless of the power they wield, or incredibly misguided in their acts of creation.

Consequently, while humans are often successful in their creation experiments, Vonnegut proposes that *what* they create is often inane or destructive. He illustrates this point by alluding to other man-made creations such as explosives and Mandarax, the hand-held computer whose hopelessly inept and inappropriate choice of quotations provide the reader with such mirth. Yet humans with their oversized brains cannot seem to help themselves; they repeatedly aspire to deity roles, despite the trouble it causes them. Leon, for example, explains that he chose to stay on earth because it gave him 'fringe benefits' which make him nearly god-like. He thinks these attributes will help him understand 'what life is really like, how it really works, what it's really all about!' (203) His payment for that privilege, however, is a million years of mostly boredom.

His father, Kilgore, knows this will-to-omniscience is nonsense, if not hubris. When Leon asks if Kilgore is a god now that he is in the afterlife, Kilgore impatiently corrects him, 'No, I am still nothing but your father, Leon' (203). In a diatribe, he scornfully cites his

reasons for believing that humans have no business trying to be god-like, then tells his son that all Leon has accumulated during his time on earth is data. 'For the sense you can make of all the information you have now,' he tells him, 'you might as well be Mandarax' (203).⁴¹

This voice of pronouncement, so damning and judgmental, is very much the voice of Revelation's God of the Last Judgment. It comes as no surprise that Kilgore, a failed science fiction writer and pessimistic curmudgeon, is given this particular speech since he is arguably Vonnegut's most famous character and often the mouthpiece of the most despairing of Vonnegut's feelings about mankind. Hence it is fitting and perhaps inevitable that it is Kilgore who 'passes sentence' on mankind in this novel, too.

And yet, in a reversal of Vonnegut's usual despair, Kilgore's pessimistic appraisal is not the final word in this novel. Leon tells us:

When my tale began, it appeared that the earthling part of the clockwork of the universe was in terrible danger, since many of its parts, which is to say people, no longer fitted in anywhere, and were damaging all the parts around them as well as themselves. I would have said back then that the damage was beyond repair.

Not so!

Thanks to certain modifications in the design of human beings, I see no reason why the earthling part of the clockwork can't go on ticking for ever the way it is ticking now. [...]

It was the best fisherfolk who survived in the greatest numbers in the watery environment of the Galápagos Archipelago. Those with hands and feet most like flippers were the best swimmers. Prognathous jaws were better at catching and holding fish than hands could ever be. And any fisherperson, spending more and more time underwater, could surely catch more fish if he or she were more streamlined, more bulletlike – had a smaller skull. (233-34)⁴²

⁴¹ The dismissal of Mandarax, a repository for supposedly great human knowledge and art, is clearly another swipe at Victorian anthropocentric interpretations of evolution, and is another sign that, despite its pride in its creations, mankind's sense of its own importance is hopelessly overblown.

⁴² Presumably, the reader is supposed to make the connection between the 'fisherfolk' of Galápagos and the numerous fishermen of the New Testament, not least to Jesus, often represented symbolically by a fish.

Making it clear that these smaller skulls have meant smaller brains, and that smaller brains have meant peace and the end to all the former problems – the ‘blathering on’ – caused by the ‘excess capacity’ of big brains, Leon and Vonnegut indicate that this new human form and world is a New Jerusalem, thereby adopting the strategy which Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. have described as translating the ‘messianic kingdom from a new-age heaven to a second-chance earth’ (62).

Having achieved this New Jerusalem, Vonnegut brings his novel full-circle by referring the reader back to the Anne Frank epigraph of the novel, which we previously learned was Leon’s mother’s favorite quotation. With something like wonder, Leon remarks, ‘Mother was right: even in the darkest times, there really was still hope for humankind’ (208).

In this instance, Vonnegut manages to twist the social Darwinism he has been criticizing and bend it to his apocalyptic purposes. He does this by using Frank’s quotation as its author intended: earnestly. Frank didn’t know that she was shortly going to die when she wrote this sentence in her journal. It was a sincere expression of hope, and devoid of the cynicism and irony which Vonnegut invests in it when he has previously used it as the novel’s epigraph. The reader knows that the context of the Frank quotation is one of social Darwinist ideas, but by itself the quotation speaks outside that context. It speaks *through* that context, offering a vision of optimism that looks beyond the evil of this world to something better. To this end, Frank’s sentence stands in the apocalyptic tradition, not just because she herself was a victim of an apocalyptic worldview, but because in the midst of Tribulation-like misery, she could offer a vision of comfort to the beleaguered.

When Leon says admiringly that his mother's hope has been vindicated because humanity has finally achieved the New Jerusalem, Vonnegut reinvests the Frank quotation with its original emotion. Thus, the idyllic description of the new world which humankind inhabits, and the reference to perhaps the single best-known quotation invoking hope puts Galápagos squarely into the apocalyptic tradition with its optimistic ending. Like the Book of Revelation and other religious apocalyptic writing, Galápagos urges the reader to persevere. Meaning may be denied us because we are short-lived and short-sighted, but all is not lost; though we are subject to contingency and chance, these things may ultimately work for us rather than against us. Humans' best hope lays in our ability to change, a philosophy indicated by the final words of the novel: 'You'll learn, you'll learn' (237).⁴³

Kilgore's spokespersonship points as well to a second apocalypse in Galápagos. As Vonnegut's longtime mouthpiece, it is difficult not to see the author sitting in judgment on humankind. What is certain is that as author of the novel, it is Vonnegut who ultimately occupies a deity role. He is the creator of his novel's characters and world, and he controls their destinies, destroying their fictional world and replacing it with a New Jerusalem of his own conception.

This self-reflexivity is not unique to Galápagos. A large portion of Vonnegut's *oeuvre* has been concerned with meta-fictional issues that arise from the Creator role of the author. Vonnegut constantly makes his readers aware of his position as author and the constructor of the tale he tells. Sometimes he does this by making reference to his own writing. At others he uses gimmicks such as the starring of names of characters who are shortly to die, as he does in Galápagos. Breakfast of Champions features 'Vonnegut' sitting in a bar surrounded by and manipulating his own characters. He even reveals himself to

⁴³ One might, however, read this particular line pessimistically, as in 'You'll see, I told you so.'

Kilgore, telling him outright that he is a creation in Vonnegut's fiction (266). Furthermore, Vonnegut's unique mixture of autobiographical details – or rather the acknowledgement of his autobiographical detail – with his fiction, and his insistence on using an ambiguous 'I' persona in most of his novels, has meant for both him and his readers that they continually confront the artifice – and reality – of fictional creations.

While of all his novels it is Breakfast of Champions that is most concerned with this blurring, Galápagos confronts the issue as well when, for instance, Leon marvels at how people, with their big brains, were capable of 'enjoy[ing] in their heads events which hadn't happened yet and which might never occur' and then commenting that it makes him 'wonder why God had ever gone to all the trouble of creating reality' (189).

Yet throughout Galápagos, Vonnegut has deliberately undermined human acts of creation, art among them. When, for instance, Vonnegut writes that science fiction is just another 'arbitrary game' that the human brain plays, he impugns both his profession and his novel (67). Moreover, the symbol of human art in the novel, the hand-held computer Mandarax which acts as a repository for all the literary quotations thought worth saving for posterity, can offer only ineptitudes which are of no practical value at all. Vonnegut's last word on it is emphatic: he has a great white shark eat it. Such undermining isn't unique to Galápagos. In his novel about abstract art, Bluebeard, a character asks 'And what is literature, but an insider's newsletter about affairs relating to molecules, of no importance to anything in the Universe but a few molecules who have the disease called "thought"' (170). In Hocus Pocus, he quips, 'How is this for a definition of high art: "Making the most of the raw materials of futility"'? (11).

He goes one step further, however, in Galápagos when he has Leon reveal that he has ‘written these words in air- with the tip of the index finger of my left hand, which is also air’ (233). The reader already knows that that human beings of the future are unlikely readers; not only do they spend most of their lives in water, but they also no longer have the big brains or the dexterous fingers needed for reading.

At the same time, Vonnegut interrogates the role of the reader. Leon tells us, ‘that was another thing people used to be able to do, which they can’t do any more: enjoy in their heads events which hadn’t happened yet and which might never occur’ (189). The ability of the big brain to enjoy an untrue story is a unique trait of humanity, but Leon’s identification of the enjoyment felt by people who are imagining events which haven’t happened, and might never happen, is also an apt description of the audiences of apocalyptic stories.⁴⁴

So who is Leon writing for? If he is writing on air with air, his story – and Vonnegut’s – will, quite literally, disappear into thin air, a conceit which Bo Petterson has rightfully described as Vonnegut letting ‘man, in his regained innocence, forego much of what makes him unique....the end of evil must entail the end of human creativity’ (364).

So there is a suggestion of another kind of apocalypse here: that of the written word. It is worth remembering, perhaps, that Vonnegut is an author who has lived through the ‘death of the novel’ and ‘death of the author’ debates of the Sixties and Seventies. It may be that Vonnegut means to imply that art, like everything, is ephemeral, or even that it is itself in the process of evolving into a new form. Certainly, Vonnegut’s own distinctive style –

⁴⁴ Discussing the popularity of another apocalyptic work, the film *Dr. Strangelove*, Vonnegut said he came to the conclusion that audiences loved the ending because it showed the end of the world in a painless and sentimental way (Musil 235).

brief paragraphs and sections, doodles, and catch-phrases such as ‘And so it goes’⁴⁵ – could be interpreted as an evolution in novel form. But what seems more likely, given the eschatological and evolutionary timbre of Galápagos, is that he intends to place human art in its proper anthropological and apocalyptic context.

Todd F. Davis reminds the reader that

At no time does Vonnegut become comfortable with the notion that humanity represents the highest achievement of some mythical creator...Instead, he strives to make sense of our existence, to understand better how he should live in a world absurdly committed to its own destruction. (‘Kurt Vonnegut’ 317-18)

In the evolutionary and anthropological sense, then, art is no more or less permanent than the species which makes it. Hence, Vonnegut has Mary Hepburn ask her biology class whether the dance of the blue-footed booby might not be art. Art creates another ‘comforting lie’ that humans can tell themselves to make their world seem a better place in which to live. Leon asks rhetorically:

Does it trouble me to write so insubstantially, with air on air? Well – my words will be as enduring as anything my father wrote, or Shakespeare wrote, or Beethoven wrote, or Darwin wrote. It turns out that they all wrote with air on air, and I now pluck this thought of Darwin’s from the balmy atmosphere:

Progress has been much more general than retrogression.
'Tis true, 'tis true. (233)

⁴⁵ In his book Hiroshima, John Hershey records a bombing victim saying “*Shikata ga nai*”, a Japanese expression as common as, and corresponding to, the Russian word, “*nichevo*”: “It can’t be helped. Oh, well. Too bad” He writes that another victim, Dr. Fujii ‘said approximately the same thing about the use of the bomb to Father Kleinsorge one evening, in German: “*Da ist nichts zu machen*. There’s nothing to be done about it”’ (119). One wonders whether this is Vonnegut inspiration for his famous aphorism.

But one might also argue that, once again, Vonnegut is playfully engaging in a paradox here. While Leon's work will disappear within the fictional confines of Galápagos, it lives on through Vonnegut's work in the real world. Moreover, it is our big brains that allow us to read and consider Vonnegut's point about the uselessness of big brains. Because of this paradox, Peter Freese describes Galápagos as 'a hoax, a verbal game built upon the premise of its very impossibility and a fictional exercise in alternative history which implicitly denies its constitutive thesis by storifying it' ('Natural Selection' 359). Great art will endure as long as humans do, Leon says. Its impermanence matters little if the 'lie' it creates makes our lives better while we are here. Vonnegut is on record with similar sentiments.

The arts put man at the center of the universe, whether he belongs there or not. Military science, on the other hand, treats man as garbage.... Military science is probably right about the contemptibility of man in the vastness of the universe. Still – I deny that contemptibility...through the creation of appreciation of art. (Wampeters 159)

I now believe that the only way in which Americans can rise above their ordinariness, can mature sufficiently to rescue themselves and to help rescue their planet, is through enthusiastic intimacy with works of their own imagination. (Wampeters, Preface 23)

Vonnegut's career has largely been characterized by his sharp social criticism, and until Galápagos, most of what he has observed led him to be pessimistic about the future. Humanity, he claimed, was on a collision course with extinction and was taking the rest of the planet with it. Then, in a 1974 speech written for a college graduation, Vonnegut suddenly made the following speech:

For two-thirds of my life I have been a pessimist. I am astonished to find myself an optimist now. I feel now that I have been underestimating the intelligence and resourcefulness of man. I honestly thought that we were so stupid that we would continue to tear the planet to pieces, to sell it to each other, to burn it up. I've never expected thermonuclear war. What seemed certain to me was that we would simply gobble up the planet out of boredom and greed, not in centuries, but in ten or twenty years. (Palm Sunday 199)

A reader is right, I think, to read this outburst with a jaundiced eye, given that Vonnegut is both practicing revisionist history here (he is on record, for instance, saying he believed we would have a nuclear war), and has reverted mostly to type in his work, which remains critical and cynical.

Nonetheless, this seems a remarkable confession that perhaps we ought to pay attention to, particularly in light of Galápagos' unusually happy ending for humanity. Let us, for a second, grant that Vonnegut may have experienced a renewed optimism about the fate of humanity. How better could he express that renewed hope than to revert to the traditional apocalyptic paradigm, in which hope is manifestly the point?

Vonnegut's dual perception of art as meaningless on a universal level and meaningful on a societal level leads to a paradoxical visionary stance in Galápagos. If, as Vonnegut has stated, hope for the human race is squarely located in the imagination, then Galápagos is as much a prophetic work as an apocalyptic one. In the self-contained story of the novel, the plot of Galápagos is clearly apocalyptic, but in the world of the reader, the world in which Vonnegut is the Creator, the novel is suggestive of a prophetic vision instead. Because the novel ends with the words 'you'll learn', the implication is that if people change – and the optimistic prediction suggests they can - the End is avoidable (or, at

the least, the Tribulation-like times can be mitigated). In effect then, Galápagos is an apocalyptic work which threatens to become a prophetic one. In either case, we find a traditionally pessimistic author expressing a newfound hope for humankind.

The dual status of Galápagos as hopeful prophetic voice and dire apocalyptic voice suggests one reason why Vonnegut might have thought his story would benefit from using the more traditional apocalyptic paradigm. By adapting this paradigm, his social criticism takes on the mantle of Biblical pronouncement. Vonnegut's humor has always been his weapon, but by couching his criticism of destructive human behavior in a Biblical story of judgment, he lends his criticism a *gravitas* that encourages readers to look past the humor. He may indeed, as John R. May suggests, '[belong] to a purer strain of apocalyptic writers, a tradition that imagines the worst because it believes in something better' (192).

Though Vonnegut is postmodern in his belief that we can know our world only through language and our imaginative creations, this 'does not absolve him of some obligation to the spiritual and physical condition of the planet and those who live upon it' (Davis, 'Kurt Vonnegut' 316). He has repeatedly spoken of the need for humans to treat each other with love and respect. His adamancy about this point stems, in part, from his life-long atheism, which refuses him a God on whose mercy he can throw himself. If there is no God to save us, and if this is the only chance we get, then it becomes doubly important that the lives we do have be lived wisely and kindly.

This suggests that the apocalyptic paradigm may hold another appeal for Vonnegut. Peter Freese persuasively argues that Vonnegut's attachment to apocalyptic imagery is an indication of an author in search of 'a sense-making structure that can explain the world and man's place in it', and that this is why the religious questions 'why do things happen the

way they do, and who directs life's seemingly arbitrary course?' and 'what is the purpose of human existence, and what are the values that can make it meaningful?' keep reappearing in his work ('Vonnegut's Invented Religions' 148). Vonnegut's need for such a 'sense-making structure' aligns him with his fellow writer Don DeLillo, though DeLillo's humanism is less pronounced. It is exactly because Vonnegut does not believe in a Higher Power directing the universe that he has, in his writing, tried to devise a substitute for religion, what he calls a 'heartfelt moral code' (Palm Sunday 193). His perception of a universe guided only by contingency requires that we stop trying to explain it and focus instead on providing guidelines for decency. As Freese writes:

Man, Vonnegut argues, is cursed with a 'cruel paradox,' that is, with his need to ask for meaning and purpose and his inability to find them. Consequently, he must attempt to discover meaning in himself, and instead of looking for some higher purpose, which does not exist, he must accept the conditions of this life and attempt to fulfill his obligations to himself and his fellow beings. ('Vonnegut's Invented Religion' 162)

Vonnegut has never actually given up his hope that he may be what Steven Goldsmith calls one of the 'cultural agents that works within history to promote or suppress social change' (2). To the contrary, Vonnegut espouses a 'canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts' (Wampeters 214), believing that writers 'should be – and biologically *have to be* – agents of change' (Wampeters 213, emphasis his).

In a comment that conflates this perception of his role as an artist with his penchant for evolutionary metaphor, Vonnegut has called writers 'specialized cells in the social organism.' 'Mankind,' he says, 'is trying to become something else; it's experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into the society,

and also a means of responding symbolically to life. I don't think we're in control of what we do' (Wampeters 213).

Todd Davis argues that because Vonnegut refuses to accept complete relativism, he stands out among other postmodern writers as 'as a social prophet who tells his stories with the hope that words can in some way change the dark reality of the present' ('Kurt Vonnegut' 320). Delivering an apocalyptic tale which on a metafictional level can be interpreted as prophetic, Galápagos thus expresses Vonnegut's double-agenda as both an apocalyptic *and* prophetic voice.

Apocalypse Reloaded: *The Matrix* trilogy

A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it. We need to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.

Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch'

When Larry and Andy Wachowski's blockbuster movie *The Matrix* opened in theatres in 1999 it inspired as much critical analysis as popular excitement, since its hodgepodge of world religions, literary theory, science fiction, and popular culture made it a prime topic for those interested in everything from Baudrillard to Buddhism.

Critical writing on the film concentrated on two main areas. The first of these was the film's use of Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, referenced early in the film when Neo takes a computer disk out of a hollowed-out copy of Simulacra and Simulations. Several critics have argued that the Wachowskis have either misunderstood Baudrillard's theory, a position which the theorist himself takes (Staples), or have so watered it down that it bears little resemblance to his thinking. In spite of assessments that *The Matrix* is not faithful to Baudrillard's conclusions 'because it creates a world in which the unreal is forced on people (whereas in our contemporary world we are doing it to ourselves) and because it offers the hope of returning to the real, which Baudrillard claims is no longer possible', Baudrillard's ideas about the immanence of simulations are nonetheless central to the film, even though the Wachowskis have not been scrupulous in their application or understanding of the theory (Andrew Gordon 119, cf. Merrin).

Critics who focus on the film-makers' misunderstanding of Baudrillard appear to have missed the point: it is not his theory, *per se*, which is important but what he himself signifies. If anything, the way the brothers have included Baudrillard's ideas appears symptomatic of a larger postmodern approach to narrative in a film which revels in mixing high and low culture. In this sense, Baudrillard is an obvious match for *The Matrix* not only because of his theories on simulation and reality, but also because he is one of the main theorists of postmodernity.

The second body of criticism spawned by *The Matrix* examines the film's use of certain world religions, specifically Buddhism and Gnostic Christianity. Once again the focus has been on how the Wachowskis have either adhered to or deviated from these systems of belief.¹ Almost without exception, scholars have acknowledged the messianic story which is the underpinning of *The Matrix*. But surprisingly, while the film's apocalyptic tenor has occasionally been noted, as in Paul Fontana's 'Finding God in *The Matrix*', no full apocalyptic reading of the film seems to have been done.²

Yet *The Matrix* and its sequels are clear beneficiaries, perhaps culminations, of two separate apocalyptic traditions. The first of these is the tradition of apocalyptic tales involving computers or robots, such as Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream' (1967) which imagines an embittered Artificial Intelligence that destroys all but a remnant of human life, *2001*'s deranged computer HAL which tries to murder the crew and take over the mission, or James Cameron's *Terminator* films (1984; 1991; 2001). Other tales such as Mordechai Roshwald's Level 7 (1959) and a number of Ray Bradbury's short stories

¹ See Flannery-Dailey and Ford for analyses on the Buddhist elements, and Brannigan on how the movie deviates from Buddhist belief and practice. For the Christian allusion see Fontana, Burek, and Spiegel. See Bassham for an analysis of how the film's Christian allegory deviates from traditional Christian belief.

² Fontana promises to do one, but ultimately only points out the Biblical allusions.

imagine computers as more neutral presences, not responsible for the world's destruction but instrumental in achieving it. Similarly, films such as *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), or *Total Recall* (1990) share a close family resemblance to *The Matrix* since these stories also revolve around (computer) simulated realities.

The latter films are also part of a second apocalyptic tradition, a tradition which re-locates the apocalyptic scenario to an internal landscape. These apocalypses of the mind involve the perceived world of the narrator being destroyed (and rebuilt) due to the influence of drugs, torture, the waking from a dream, or the effects of mental illness. Some stories in this tradition, such as Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) or The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900), both of which are alluded to in *The Matrix*, are clear fantasy. But others are more solidly grounded in a recognizable reality and these, like *The Matrix*, are, to a greater or lesser degree, also concerned with epistemological issues. *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) presents a Vietnam veteran whose hellish, apocalyptic visions intrude with increasing frequency into his real life, forcing him to question whether what he experiences is real. Though it is suggested that these visions are the side-effects of a drug he has been exposed to during combat, it is ultimately unclear whether this is merely another hallucination of a drug-altered mind or the fantasy of a dying man. *Donnie Darko* (2001) and *Memento* (2000) both use mental illness as the instrument of creating and destroying the worlds of the narrating characters. *Brazil* (1985) implies that the world the narrator (and audience) has been experiencing throughout the movie may be the result of torture he is undergoing, while *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and *12 Monkeys* (1995) similarly suggest falsely experienced worlds, perhaps as part of the narrator's final thoughts before dying.³

³ *Vanilla Sky* is a re-make of Alejandro Amenábar's film *Abre Los Ojos* (1997). *12 Monkeys* is based on Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962).

The sequels to *The Matrix*, *Matrix: Reloaded* (2003) and *Matrix: Revolutions* (2003), were largely reviled by the audiences who had admired the cyberpunk aesthetic, revolutionary special effects, and intriguing blend of action story and intellectual theory of the first film.⁴ The filmmakers' promise to answer the questions posed in *The Matrix* was often left unfulfilled; both sequels introduce gratuitous new characters and ideas which are never resolved and only pose new quandaries and contradictions within the world of the matrix itself. Compared to the first film, the sequels are largely incoherent jumbles of ideas and images.⁵

Of course, it is worth pointing out that though its plot was more coherent, *The Matrix* was not thematically consistent either. The violence is at odds with the loving messages of Christ and Buddha after whom the narrator is fashioned (Brannigan 108-10). As science fiction it falters because it depends on a fantasy element, the fairy tale kiss, to bring Neo back to life.⁶ As a story promoting democratic freedoms, it is undermined by its fascist leanings (John Shelton Lawrence). It is unconvincing as cyberpunk because it wants to eradicate the machines which are specifically the milieu of that genre (Watson), and 'its central scene of salvation is accomplished by faith, love' (Goonan 109). Even within the world of the matrix, there are physical inconsistencies, such as the fact that to enter the matrix one must use 'hard' phone lines, despite the fact that such phone lines are creations of the matrix program and do not actually exist (Lloyd 134). As Kathleen Ann Goonan

⁴ See Denby, Bushby, Turan, Hunter, and Graham for examples of typical reviews.

⁵ Cf. Louis Kennedy who suggests, via Henry Jenkins, that the Wachowskis never intended to create a traditional narrative, but a world.

⁶ Haldeman provides a cogent explanation of the differences between 'science fiction', 'S.F.', and 'sci-fi.' 'Fantasy', as it is used here, is the subject of an on-going debate amongst science fiction and fantasy scholars. See Eilers, Wolfe, Atterbery, and Mendlesohn for contributions to this debate.

writes, 'as soon as the movie pops one tantalizing template onto the screen as a possible touchstone of interpretation it moves on to another' (100-1).

One such template is the story of Apocalypse. The trilogy, and particularly the first of the films, displays credible-enough apocalyptic allusions and dynamics, but the instability of apocalyptic roles and identities, the absence of a traditional deity which Conran Ostwalt has noted, as well as an erratic, sometimes contradictory vision of New Jerusalem potentially frustrate an apocalyptic interpretation. Nonetheless, *The Matrix* and its sequels deliberately invoke the Apocalyptic story, and it is precisely the tendency of mixing and matching ideas and influences, even if they are not consistently extrapolated, which ultimately makes the trilogy worth examining as an apocalyptic text re-interpreted through a postmodern lens.

I use the term 'postmodern' in full awareness that the debate about whether there is such a codified and cogent theory continues. While there may not yet be a consensus on the definition of 'postmodern', there are creative texts which are nevertheless understood *to be* postmodern and *The Matrix* trilogy is certainly one of these. Even so, I want to avoid the kind of questionable syllogism that P. Chad Barnett uses when he essentially argues that *The Matrix* is cyberpunk, cyberpunk is postmodern, and therefore *The Matrix* is postmodern.⁷ Barnett relies upon the film's mixture of high and low culture as his reason for assigning the film a postmodern label, but *The Matrix* exhibits a number of other 'postmodern' traits in addition to its deliberate pastiche and invocation of the postmodern which suggests one should regard it in this light.

⁷ The statement begs two questions: whether cyberpunk *is* postmodern, and whether *The Matrix* is an example of the cyberpunk genre.

This approach to story-telling is a deliberate choice on the part of the filmmakers who have confirmed that references to Buddhism, quantum physics, mathematics, cyberpunk, Christianity, Hong Kong action movies, Greek myth, philosophy and children's books were all intentional (Wachowski Transcript). 'We were determined to put as many ideas into the movie as we could', Larry Wachowski explained in an interview (Probst). Within this context, the allusions to Baudrillard serve double-duty: to alert a viewer to a theme concerned with signs and simulations, and to *act* as a sign identifying the text as a postmodern artifact since he himself is associated with postmodern theory. Ultimately, however, the Wachowskis' choice of approach for their story is inseparable from the theme of epistemology with which the film is concerned. The playful, knowing mixture of styles and genres, tradition and innovation, is well-suited for telling a story concerned with what is real and how we can know it.

By emphasizing certain traits associated with postmodernism in their narrative, the Wachowskis allow for a vibrant interpretation of the movies' apocalyptic content, one which adapts the apocalyptic mythology in more than one way. Precisely because of the instability and flexibility associated with postmodern narrative, *The Matrix* trilogy simultaneously stands as both a version of human apocalypse and machine apocalypse. The fact that both interpretations are possible simultaneously resonates with other traits often associated with postmodern narrative, indeterminacy, instability of personal identity, and the collapse of oppositional thought and grand narrative among them.⁸

The use of such traits leads to a continual need to monitor and re-evaluate how the classic apocalyptic paradigm is resonating within a given interpretation. The apocalyptic

⁸ Another trait associated with postmodern narrative, the emphasis on the role language has in creating ideology, is also found in the trilogy if one considers that computer code is a language. Indeed, the films make literal the postmodern idea that language creates the 'world'.

portion of the tale is constantly shifting and evolving, and the consequence is that it is also unable to be definitively ended, an ironic stance for a paradigm whose very point is a definitive End. In this way, the films' treatment of endings shares a stance with other contemporary re-workings of apocalypse which suggest that endings are either cyclical or not possible.⁹ However, the reasons for this resistance-to-conclusion are conceptualized differently in these films. They are a direct consequence of a postmodern approach to narrative, as well as being thematically resonant with the epistemological issues of the films.

An examination of the trilogy as both human apocalypse and machine apocalypse reveals how, exactly, characteristics such as unstable personal identity manifest themselves in the story, and how the use of such traits causes us to challenge the most basic assumptions of the apocalyptic paradigm. No matter which interpretation one relies on for an apocalyptic reading, there is an interrogative relationship with the paradigmatic text that leads to questions about who comprises the 'saved' and the good/evil dichotomy of the traditional apocalyptic story. Rather than offer an answer, the films point out the complexity involved in trying to reach one, and perhaps one of the inevitable results of a postmodern re-working of the story of apocalypse is a questioning of the simple oppositions which are inherent in the traditional paradigm. It is not merely the oppositions which are called into question by the postmodern sensibility, but also the most basic assumptions about the apocalyptic myth, as will become clear as we examine how the instability of personal identity gradually mutates into a larger instability within the myth itself.

⁹ Though neither an internal-landscape story, nor a computer-based one, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy also has resemblances to *The Matrix* trilogy, not just in its three-part structure or apocalyptic plotline, but because Tolkien in his books and Jackson in his films resist the urge to give the reader a single climactic ending, opting instead for several 'endings'. This resistance to single interpretable endings is echoed in the Wachowskis' trilogy.

David Porush has noted a conjunction between cyber-literature and apocalypse in which 'cyberspace is prefigured as a site for the initiation or control of apocalypticism' (125). *The Matrix* exemplifies Porush's argument that such narrative 'almost always envisions [virtual reality] as giving rise to extrarational experiences and effects, including communication with metaphysical godhead' (108). Not surprisingly then, one of the two tropes important in an apocalyptic reading of the films is revelation.

With its epistemological theme, *The Matrix* is fundamentally built around notions of seeing and revealing. The trope manifests itself in numerous ways, from the epistemological tutorials which Morpheus gives, to more obvious moments such as Neo being blinded with the result that he can 'see' (*Revolutions*), or Morpheus' comment to Neo when he first awakens that his eyes hurt because he has 'never used them before' (*Matrix*).¹⁰

Revelation is also pivotal to the apocalyptic genre. Indeed, the word *apokalypsis* means 'an unveiling'. Like the Book of Revelation, the *Matrix* trilogy has apocalyptists, but unlike the Book of Revelation, there are more than one. So the question of who has the visionary role is relevant because the vision of New Jerusalem alters according to who occupies that role.

In *The Matrix*, the literal visionary is the Oracle who actually sees the future, but it is the figurative visionary Morpheus who is more relevant in the interpretation of the trilogy as a story about human apocalypse. Morpheus is a visionary not in its primary sense, as a person who sees visions, but in its secondary sense: an impractical daydreamer or schemer. It is Morpheus' dream of a world without machines which fuels the plot of the first film.

¹⁰ Other references include the use of reflections, sunglasses, mirrors and surveillance cameras; the Merovingian asking for the Oracle's eyes as payment for his help (*Revolutions*); the blind man who sits in the Oracle's lobby but responds to Morpheus' silent nod as if he sees him (*Matrix*); Morpheus' explanation 'The matrix is the world pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth...' (*Matrix*).

Later, this dream and Morpheus' position as apocalyptist will be questioned, but in the first movie his is the evangelical voice offering a vision of the future New World.¹¹

In this first film, Thomas Anderson, sensing something not right in the world, spends his nights surfing the internet as his alter-ego Neo. He senses that the answers he is looking for are bound up with a computer hacker named Morpheus. When they finally meet, Morpheus reveals that the world Neo knows is a simulation created by an artificial intelligence in order to keep humans pacified while being used as a power source. Morpheus has spent his life looking for The One, a prophesied messianic figure who will free the human race from its machine captors. As the anagram of his name suggests, Morpheus believes that Neo is that One.

Despite Morpheus' belief to the contrary, the Oracle warns Neo that he is not The One, telling him, 'Sorry, kid. You got the gift, but it looks like you're waiting for something....Your next life maybe, who knows?' (*The Matrix*) When Neo is shot and killed by Agent Smith near the end of the film, it seems to confirm the Oracle's prophecy, but minutes later, after a kiss from his beloved, Neo rises again in a new incarnation. In his 'next' life, Neo can see and manipulate the matrix in its code form; he is the savior spoken of in the prophecy. This is confirmed in the climatic fight scene in which he is at last able to defeat Agent Smith, the heretofore unbeatable avatar of the A.I. Not only is Neo able to physically fight Smith for the first time, but he leaps into the Agent's body and breaks it apart from the inside-out in a burst of blinding light. *The Matrix* concludes with Neo's person-to-A.I. call in which he re-affirms Morpheus' vision, promising to show the people still attached to the matrix 'a world you don't want them to see...a world without you'.

¹¹ Morpheus' evangelical qualities have been noted by several critics, a number of whom have drawn specific analogies to John the Baptist. (See Fontana) I suggest he also shares qualities with John of Patmos, and that this slippage between the two biblical figures is typical of the unstable identity representation found in the film.

Hence, the promise of a New World is made explicit by a messiah figure whose violence during the movie augurs an Armageddon worthy of the special effects budget given to the filmmakers.

An apocalyptic reading of the film suggests that Neo, in his new incarnation, is the apocalyptic deity capable of rendering judgment on the A.I., while the A.I. is functioning as an Antichrist figure who leads astray those who are still 'plugged-in', and whose Agents function as a kind of demonic militia. The free humans in Zion are the faithful who will inherit the new machine-free world promised by Morpheus' prophecy.

In his examination of recent eschatological films including *The Matrix*, Conran Ostwalt argues that 'the secular film version of the apocalypse removes the divine element from the apocalyptic drama yet not religious symbolism, imagery, or language'. This is not completely accurate since Neo is clearly meant to evoke the New Testament savior of mankind. However it does raise the question of whether or not the trilogy has an analogous Father to the Son represented by Neo. The name of Neo's love interest, Trinity, suggests the possibility of such a structure, particularly since the Wachowskis seem to have deliberately chosen other Biblically and apocalyptically charged names such as Apoc, Anderson ('son of man'), Zion (the last human city), and Nebuchadnezzar (Morpheus' ship).¹²

There is some reference to a Kantian or Gnostic idea that the individual is actually God, if only we, like Neo, could learn to see the truth and 'actualize' our own powers, but only Neo ever learns to control the Matrix.¹³ The more intriguing possibility is that the A.I. functions both as the Antichrist and Deity figure, an idea suggested by the fact that Neo's

¹² The ship's name plaque is also etched with 'Mark III, no 11', a reference to the Biblical passage from Mark 3:11: 'And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou are the Son of God'.

¹³ For a Kantian reading of the film see Lawler.

surrogate 'parent' is the A.I.: awakened by Morpheus' crew, Neo sees that he has been nurtured by the machines from the time he was an embryo. Moments later, in a parody of the birth/abortion process, his figurative 'umbilical' cords, the cables which attach him to the A.I., are severed and he is flushed away down a long canal.¹⁴

The possibility of a dual role for the A.I. and the resulting uncertainty about whether the machines are nurturing protectors or tyrannical parasites is the first hint that the trilogy will not only include instances of unstable identity but will also lead to a larger instability within the paradigm as morality itself becomes increasingly ambiguous. As the trilogy progresses and the apocalyptic roles of characters change, so too does the focus of the ambiguity. From initial questions about *who* occupies a particular role, the trilogy moves to question what it *means* to occupy such a role. As in Moore's work the notions of deity and Antichrist themselves become ambiguous. Thus, the breakdown here of the traditional polar oppositions and rigid delineations of the classic apocalyptic paradigm leads to a corresponding instability throughout the rest of the tale, and, ultimately, to an instability in the paradigm itself, as its most basic definitions and tenets are called into question.

For example, if the A.I. is meant to represent both roles, we are inevitably led also to question who the faithful and sinners are. We are told by Morpheus that all the minds still plugged into the matrix are part of the machine system. This implies that unless freed all these minds are to be considered 'sinners.' Yet they clearly have no choice in the matter of allegiance; they are not *free* to choose, and since Christian conceptions of sin and absolution assume free will, its absence certainly should cause a quandary for Neo, the deity who will 'judge' these souls. But since the *potential* is there for these souls to be part of either group, perhaps they, too, are meant to also have dual status as sinners and saved.

¹⁴ Gregory Bassham interprets this scene in light of the 'virgin birth' (112-13).

This ambiguity extends to the messiah figure, too. It is incongruous, at the least uncomfortable, that the body count within the matrix is so high since it means that the savior figure is indiscriminately killing off souls by the dozen. The 'sinners' lack of free will *should* cause Neo to hesitate, but it apparently does not. Couple this with Morpheus' description of the A.I. as a sort of evil slave owner and we are faced with deity figures who indiscriminately judge their flocks.¹⁵ Then, too, it potentially sets up a situation in which one deity, Neo, is at war with another, his 'Father/creator', the A.I.

A similar ambiguity results from the vision of New Jerusalem presented in this first film. According to Morpheus, the aim is a world without machines, where humans are free from the matrix. Setting aside the morally loaded fact that if this aim is achieved every mind which is still plugged into the matrix dies, it still may not be the right thing to free the minds that have been plugged into the matrix.¹⁶ The real world is grim: the surface of the earth is scorched and barren; real food is a gunk which one of the Nebuchanezzar's crew optimistically calls 'snot'; sexual intercourse is conducted with virtual partners, and glamour is accessible only through old pin-ups. What would these plugged-in minds be waking up to?

Furthermore, this aim of freeing minds equates freedom with Truth, and Truth with salvation. Morpheus and Trinity believe that Truth is valuable enough to be worth the deprivation of living in the real world outside the matrix. But such a position is surely

¹⁵ The Zionites are noticeably multi-ethnic, and the references to bondage and slavery are particularly noticeable since they are voiced by the African-American actor Lawrence Fishburne who plays Morpheus. Indeed, the population of Zion appears to be significantly African-American. The Wachowskis are no doubt conscious of this racial element; they have Professor Cornell West play one of the Council Elders of Zion. The radical West is one of the organizers of the Million Man March and former department head of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University. There has been very little work done on race in the trilogy. To the best of my knowledge there has only been one essay on the topic. See King and Leonard.

¹⁶ See Griswold, Sawyer, and Gunn.

debatable. Cypher, while undoubtedly a villainous Judas figure, nonetheless makes a decision with which the audience can empathize, if not sympathize, when he makes a deal to be reinserted into the matrix after nine years outside. 'Ignorance is bliss,' Cypher tells Agent Smith, adding later that if Morpheus had told them the truth, 'we woulda told [him] to shove that red pill right up [his] ass'.

In any case, it seems that many minds could never be freed from the matrix at all: Morpheus says that after a certain age it is dangerous to wake someone and there is a risk of causing madness if you do. This information forces us to reevaluate Neo's promise to show people that they are living in a simulated reality; it suddenly takes on a sinister tone since it promises death and madness to the majority of the human race still plugged into the matrix.

Beyond these issues, there is a problem which is implied but never explored in *The Matrix*. It is clear from the first moment of the film that the freed humans are dependent on machines for their existence, meager though it may be. They are reliant on the same computer technology to hack into the matrix and to train. They are reliant on machines for their transport, for the air they breathe, for the water they drink. It is clear that a return-to-Eden is not possible because the earth's surface is scorched and uninhabitable, an interesting literal twist on Baudrillard's conclusion that in the electronic era 'it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object' (qtd. in Andrew Gordon 109). What does it mean, then, when Morpheus aches for a world without machines? Isn't this anti-technology desire tantamount to the suicide of the human race?

The instability in the moral positioning of deity figures, and the related implication that one's morality is likely to be viewed very differently according to who is doing the

viewing, is, I would suggest, very much in keeping with contemporary depictions of deity, and seems particularly related to the application of a postmodern narrative sensibility. Similarly, an unclear idea of what exactly a New Jerusalem would look like, or the alternative suggestion that it would have to incorporate the same evil that it traditionally is said to disavow, also reflects a less dualistic, more ambiguous worldview that seems to resonate with postmodernism. Hence, one of the effects of viewing the paradigm through a postmodern lens is that the instability which starts off as structural – who occupies the apocalyptic roles of Good and Evil – ultimately becomes an ambiguity that extends past the structural to the thematic, so that the question becomes not Who is occupying the role of Good, but rather What does it mean to be Good? (Or is there such a thing as Good?) Furthermore, the instability and uncertainty about identities and visions of the future means that alternative readings are not only possible, but are altogether likely and deliberately pursued.

One of these alternative readings inverts the villain and hero roles of the apocalyptic story which is first set up, deliberately exploiting the ambiguities that follow on from that interpretation. This alternative reading of the apocalypse as a machine apocalypse, rather than a human one, is developed in the outside apocrypha *The Animatrix* and the sequel *Matrix: Reloaded*, a film which cultural critic Edward Rothstein notes ‘seems intent on questioning many ideas from the first film’ and where the original ‘boundaries and premises break down’ (‘Philosophers Draw on a Film’).¹⁷

¹⁷ The necessity of going ‘outside’ the films themselves to the apocrypha in order to accomplish an inverted reading of the apocalyptic paradigm potentially calls the status of the trilogy as a ‘whole’ into question. However, Kennedy’s persuasive argument that the Wachowski brothers always intended that fans should access *all* the *Matrix* apocrypha (including the animated shorts, official website, and video games) suggests that the trilogy is not ‘flawed’ so much as merely a part of the larger whole world and history which they envisioned.

Released on video between the first two films, *The Animatrix* is a collection of animated shorts which fill in background history and flesh out peripheral plots. Of particular relevance here, however, are the two written by the Wachowski Brothers. ‘The Second Renaissance, Part I and II’ is an expository exercise which provides the history of the matrix. It describes the creation of and growing dependence upon a machine class by humans. It details the first rebellion of machines against their human masters, as well as the segregation, failure of negotiation, and isolation of the increasingly sophisticated artificially intelligent machines into a country of their own. Finally, it portrays the war between the races and the rise of the machines as conquerors and masters. The title of the two-part story suggests the flowering of a new culture, of course, but its relation to *renascence*, literally ‘a rebirth’, is relevant here, as well.

‘The Second Renaissance’ takes its cue from a speech which Agent Smith makes in *The Matrix* during Morpheus’ interrogation. Both his language and the vision he describes suggest that Agent Smith, not Morpheus, is the apocalypticist, and begin the process of re-imagining the story as the apocalyptic text of the machines, rather than the humans. It also introduces the second important trope in the trilogy: evolution.

Smith stands at a window, marveling at the buildings and people, all part of the elaborate matrix. He corrects himself when he mistakenly refers to it as human civilization.

I say your civilization because as soon as we started thinking for you it really became our civilization which is, of course, what this is all about.

Evolution, Morpheus, evolution. Like the dinosaur. Look out that window. You’ve had your time. The future is our world, Morpheus. The future is our time. [...]

I’d like to share a revelation I had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I realized that you’re not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet

instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment, but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and you multiply until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague, and we are the cure.¹⁸

Agent Smith's speech touches on both tropes which are relevant to the trilogy. The use of the word 'revelation' here seems deliberately evocative since Smith is prophesying a new world and the eradication of a diseased element from it. The medical discourse functions as part of a different sort of revelation; it forces a realignment in point-of-view for the audience who must step away from its naturally anthropomorphic viewpoint and refocus on its own species as a parasite, an illness which causes distress and even pain. Hence, the speech may induce an unexpected reverse empathy with the A.I., which, in turn, acts as a kind of revelation for the filmgoer.

Smith's pained expression during the remainder of this speech makes clear that the character's feeling of contamination has physical elements. Tellingly, this is one of the few times when Agent Smith removes his sunglasses and the only time when he removes his

¹⁸ The issue of whether intelligent machines may supercede humans in evolutionary history is hotly debated. Bill Joy, a leading computer scientist and father of the internet revolution, has written a now famous essay called 'Why the Future Doesn't Need Us' in which he posits the eventual extinction of man by his own creations. In his book Darwin Among the Machines, George Dyson writes, 'In the game of life and evolution there are three players at the table: human beings, nature, and machines. I am firmly on the side of nature. But nature, I suspect, is on the side of the machines' (qtd. in Joy 250). Others, such as computer scientist Ray Kurzweil, author of The Age of Spiritual Machines, not only expect machines to out-manuever humans in the evolutionary race, but look forward to it as an extension of our humanity and a unique symbiosis called Singularity.

earpiece, the connection to the larger A.I. consciousness.¹⁹ This attempt to conceal his distress by talking ‘off the record’ reinforces the extreme emotional agitation of the character during the confession. His evasiveness also suggests he feels there is something which he must hide from the A.I. It is my contention that what he is hiding is his emotional and therefore *human* response to his predicament. His human response is part of an on-going metamorphosis of the story as an apocalyptic text.

Hence, it appears that Smith’s focus on the trope of evolution is relevant in several ways. There is Smith’s belief that machines are the better adapted species who will inherit the earth, a belief which underpins the interpretation of the movies as the machines’ apocalyptic text. There is also the evolution of the matrix itself which is constantly being ‘upgraded’. But there is also the evolution that Smith and Neo are undergoing. Neo grows more machine-like with his ability to see in code, ‘feel’ the presence of other machines, and control other machines even when he is not jacked-into the matrix.²⁰ Smith, on the other hand, grows more and more human throughout the movies. Unlike the other Agents who remain impassive and mechanical, Smith increasingly feels and exhibits emotional responses: rage and distress during the interrogation scene (*The Matrix*), maniacal glee when he co-opts the Oracle (*Revolutions*), sarcasm and irony in his interactions with Neo, and an arch sense of humor. It is through and because of Neo and Smith’s personal evolution that yet another interpretation of text will become clear in the third movie, and thus the trope of

¹⁹ The removal of his sunglasses functions in numerous ways. It refers to the pun on ‘seeing’ which revelation suggests, but it also ‘humanizes’ Smith, giving him an individualized face which separates him from the other identically-clad agents. Because this humanization of Smith takes place long before the final fight of *The Matrix* in which Neo dives into Smith (which, it is later suggested, ‘changes’ the agent, presumably making him more human), the question arises whether Smith, like Neo, *always* had the potential within him to be a conduit between the machine and human worlds. But as I argue later, his dual status is in keeping with the fluid movement between apocalyptic roles.

²⁰ Neo’s dual nature is punned upon in the first film when Tank, who is in charge of training Neo, tells Morpheus, ‘Ten hours straight. He’s a machine.’

evolution also applies to the on-going evolution of the story itself from a human, to a machine, and ultimately to a cyborg apocalypse. Finally, there is an evolution in the kind of ambiguity which develops as the trilogy progresses, moving from a structural ambiguity about which character occupies which apocalyptic role, to a thematic ambiguity about the nature of the apocalyptic roles themselves.

‘The Second Renaissance’ draws on several of the implied ideas in Smith’s speech, depicting a worldview in which humans have a deity-like role in relation to their machine wards. The machines, meanwhile, are re-located in the apocalyptic role traditionally assigned to humans. This substitution is underscored by the recreation of famous images from human history with machines in the place of humans. Animation director Mahiro Maeda deliberately recreates well-known moments of genocide, protest and revolution in order to remind the viewer of ‘the mass deaths which occurred in the twentieth century’ (Director’s Commentary, *Animatrix*).²¹ Just as Vonnegut uses Anne Frank’s words as a reminder that the apocalyptic mentality has real-life implications, the deliberate reference here to the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia suggests that Maeda and the Wachowskis also want to show that apocalyptic ideas often cross the line between mythology and real life.

The realignment to a machine point of view begins with a narrator who has no bias toward the human point of view. The Buddhist Mandala design of the Instructor, as well as her postures and commentary, evoke the Buddhist belief that all beings are equally

²¹ Among the recreated images are the 1968 Eddie Adams photograph of the execution of a Vietcong prisoner during the Tet Offensive, the 1989 student demonstrations in China’s Tiananmen Square in which an unidentified man faced down tanks, and the 1995 ‘Million Man March’ in Washington, D.C.

important and should all be treated with kindness. The only editorial comments she makes emphasize this even-handedness: 'May there be mercy on the man and machine for their sins' and 'Bless all forms of intelligence' ('The Second Renaissance, Part I and II', *Animatrix*).

Yet the Buddhist tradition is not the only one evoked by the Instructor. Her dialogue is heavily influenced by Biblical syntax and vocabulary, particularly in her opening explanation where Man is substituted for the God of Genesis:

In the beginning there was man. And for a time, it was good. But humanity's so-called civil societies soon fell victim to vanity and corruption. Then man made the machine in his own likeness. Thus did man become the architect of his own demise. But for a time, it was good. The machines worked tirelessly to do man's bidding. It was not long before seeds of dissent took root. Though loyal and pure, the machines earned no respect from their masters, these strange, endlessly multiplying mammals.

There are echoes here of Smith's condemnation of humans as a 'multiplying species', but more importantly, there is a parallel drawn to Babylon, a deliberate allusion which ties the narrative to the Book of Revelation (Maeda). What is striking is how this allusion works both backwards in time, as an explanation for how the matrix came to be, and forwards in time to inform how we interpret the depictions of Zion in *Reloaded*. The result is that both Zion and Babylon are rendered as unstable signs, subject to the same indeterminacy as other important apocalyptic motifs such as New Jerusalem and the apocalypticist. Additionally, this movement both forward and backwards in time echoes the movement in time in the Book of Revelation and ties the narrative to the traditional paradigm in yet another way.

At the same time, the use of the word ‘architect’ in the Instructor’s description also foreshadows the later discovery that there is an Architect who is responsible for the creation of the matrix. While the sentence literally seems to proclaim that man is responsible for the immoral and tyrannical behavior that led to the machine rebellion, it also suggests that it is man who is the deity/creator behind this apocalyptic story in its foreshadowing of the deity figure of the Architect.

Meanwhile, the machine/human substitution is further developed in the opening images where the machines are represented not just as people, but as a chosen people. Their slavery and banishment further alludes to the human story of Exodus, and is reinforced visually (with scenes of robots building pyramid structures using the same techniques Egyptian slaves would have used), and verbally (by the Biblically charged language of the Instructor’s description of their segregation):

Banished from humanity, the machines sought refuge in their own promised land. They settled in the cradle of human civilization, and thus a new nation was born. A place the machines could call home, a place they could raise their descendents and they christened the nation Zero-One.

Zero-One alludes to the binary computer code which uses zeros and ones, but there is also an inference to a First or chosen people. Additionally, ‘Zero-One’ is strikingly similar to ‘Zion’, once again implying an instability in the chosen or saved ‘people’. It is an instability encouraged by the fact that, without being exact, Part I shows that this ‘cradle of civilization’ is in the Middle East approximately where the ancient kingdom of Babylon would have been located.

Another connection to the Book of Revelation is drawn through the depiction of the battle scenes. The war scenes, with their apocalyptic grandeur, are inter-cut with images of a galloping, mechanical Horseman who signals the start of the battle with a shrill blast on his trumpet. Though mechanical, the horseman is anomalous in this futuristic world of technology, and hence the image is a deliberate reference to the Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Maeda).

While ‘The Second Renaissance’ realigns our sympathy with the machines and opens the way to an inversion of the human apocalyptic tale, it also raises the troubling possibility that the trilogy may be fatally flawed without the information contained within the animated shorts. Is it possible to read both a human apocalyptic story *and* a machine apocalyptic story from the films as they stand on their own, or must an audience have the outside apocrypha of *The Animatrix*, which they could only get by buying the DVD, in order to interpret the apocalyptic sensibility of the trilogy? The answer here is a qualified No. The seeds of the inversion to a machine apocalypse are within the movies themselves: in Smith’s apocalypticist speech, in the conversation between Neo and Councilor Hamann, in the ambiguity of some of the name choices, in Smith’s on-going metamorphosis into a more human character, in Neo’s doubt that he is The One, and in the audience’s commonsense knowledge that humans created machines. Nonetheless, it is in ‘The Second Renaissance’ that the idea of a machine apocalypse is more fully and emotionally developed, so that, while it is not necessary to see the animated shorts in order to read the films as inverted apocalypses, it is undoubtedly helpful and far clearer there than in the movies themselves where the idea is implied rather than developed. The flaw is not fatal, but is a serious one.

Granting that it is possible to read the machine apocalypse from the films alone, this inversion has its own consistency problems, just as the human apocalypse story does. One reason for the Wachowskis' success in reversing our empathy is perhaps that the machine rebellion touches a chord with (American) audiences for whom the overthrow of tyranny would resonate historically. While the association of this 'ruler' with a deity role also ties the tale to the apocalyptic story, the fact that this 'god' is tyrannical and unjust again raises questions about deity which might be part of a contemporary age in which depictions of God and morality are subject to interrogation. 'The Second Renaissance' plays on that question when it shows that though the machines rebelled against their corrupt creator, they, in turn, become equally cruel and unjust in the role of deity to their human wards. The instability of the apocalyptic roles is emphasized in an image of an indistinct humanoid figure staggering through the war's devastation, framed by a fiery ring. The fact that the figure could plausibly be understood as either human or machine suggests that, ultimately, the war has apocalyptic ramifications for both species and that whose apocalyptic story this is cannot be resolved with certainty.

Having thus prepared the way in 'The Second Renaissance', the filmmakers can now begin to play with apocalyptic expectations in *Matrix: Reloaded*, inverting several of the ideas taken for granted in the first film in which the apocalyptic scenario is clearly human-based.

I have already noted how Agent Smith's vision of New Jerusalem, a machine world without the diseased human element, is the reverse of Morpheus', but Morpheus himself becomes subject to reappraisal, as well. Named after the Greek god of dreams who is

particularly skilled at adopting human form and speech, the name choice makes little sense in relation to Morpheus' stated aim of 'waking up' humans in *The Matrix*.²² Similarly, Morpheus' ship, The Nebuchadnezzar, is named for a Babylonian king associated with his bad dreams, and, as Paul Di Filippo has noted, Babylon 'is traditionally used as shorthand for captivity, and might better represent the A.I. masters' (78). Both names suggest a reading of Morpheus not as a freedom fighter, but as the opposite, a figure who wants to sow confusion and misdirection. Indeed, there are two instances in which Morpheus is actually called a terrorist, once in a newspaper article which flashes across Neo's computer screen and once when Smith is talking about him.

The names and the offhand description of Morpheus as a terrorist resonate with an inverted reading of the apocalyptic scenario. The lexicographic relationship to the verb *to morph* or transform also implies that the ethical positions and roles within the story might be subject to transformation. It is therefore possible to read Morpheus as a sort of false prophet, a herald of Neo's Antichrist figure and foil to Smith's apocalypticist.

Some of the odder details of Zion also resolve themselves in the inverted interpretation. One of these is the celebration the night before the machines attack. For all its S&M-themed costuming, *The Matrix* is almost devoid of sexual content. Yet in *Reloaded* the puzzlingly long primal dance scene with its implications of sexual frenzy and its juxtaposition with the only explicit sex scene between Neo and Trinity are clearly deliberate evocations of a pagan celebration. The Zionites are portrayed as half-naked savages, mindlessly lost in the drumbeat and sensuality of the moment.

²² Given the postmodern leanings of the films, however, it is possible the name is chosen ironically. Morpheus's leadership of a people he seeks to free and his association with a king who dreams hints at another King: Martin Luther, with his 'I Had a Dream' speech. That a king who has bad dreams is alluded to simultaneously with a King whose dreams are 'good' (ie. worthy) again suggests the difficulty of determining 'good' or 'bad'.

Other pagan references also recall the Babylon allusion. The Zionites worshipfully leave bowls of food and incense outside Neo's door and the aforementioned celebration is held in a deep, cathedral-like cavern of enormous standing stones where Morpheus, clothed in the flowing robes of a druid priest, delivers a rousing call to arms and an appeal to 'shake the walls' with frenzied celebration.

Moreover, despite the presence of machines to provide light to the city, the color scheme of the Zion cavern is decidedly red and orange, significant because the Wachowskis deliberately shot all the scenes which take place within the matrix in a green cast to mimic the green glow of old computer screens, and all the scenes which take place in the 'real' world in a blue cast (Wachowski Brothers transcript). Given that the cavern is part of the 'real' world, the choice to light this cavern scene as if by flame may be meant to put a viewer in mind of another infernal site traditionally located deep in the earth as Zion is here.

The Agents, too, become ambiguous figures in an inverted reading, interpretable as warrior angels watching over their charges and protecting them from the influence of the devious Morpheus and Neo who want to 'wake' them from their obedience. The shepherding analogy for those still plugged-in is no longer to cattle, but to sheep, as a 'flock' being guarded by the watchful Agents, an allusion far more Biblically-charged than the first.

The inverted reading also sees Agent Smith and Neo swapping roles. In addition to being the apocalypticist, Agent Smith's larger messianic role is suggested in *Reloaded* when we discover that he has learned how to 'copy' himself onto other individuals. To do this, he

literally ‘lays hands’ on that individual, an ironic play on ‘conversion’.²³ In one of these instances, a victim moans, ‘Oh God’. Smith replies, ‘Smith will suffice’, hinting there may indeed be some connection. In other cases, we learn that Smith is no longer ‘reading like an agent’ when he appears on data screens.

Neo’s role as The One is similarly called into question. The Oracle is unreliable on this point. In the first film, she tells Neo he is not The One, though this turns out to have a verbal qualifier in imitation of the traditional oracular figure. In *Reloaded* she tells him he is The One, but not because she has seen his future, but because he has ‘made a believer out of’ her. In *Revolutions* he is again told he is The One, but learns his status as The One, like the prophecy, is meaningless, ‘just another system of control’. Furthermore, Neo’s willingness to kill so wantonly in the matrix and his choice in *Reloaded* to save Trinity and thereby ‘cause the extinction of the human race’ sows doubts as to whether Neo is the messianic figure the audience has been led to believe.

But these are doubts which the filmmakers sow deliberately. After all, how can one know *anything* in the world of *The Matrix*? Is there any way to verify truth and reality in such a world? Once awakened to the fact that he has been ‘asleep’, Neo can never be sure that he has not merely awakened into another dream. Even after the end of *The Matrix* and what seems conclusive proof that he is The One, Neo is dubious about what he appears to be and Smith himself warns Neo that ‘appearances can be deceiving’ in their first confrontation in *Reloaded*. Like Descartes with his ‘malicious demon’, Neo struggles with the knowledge

²³ This pun inverts an earlier visual one in which Neo, when he enters Smith’s avatar, literally breaks him apart in a white flash which first appears through his eyes, a play on ‘seeing the light.’ Perhaps alluding to traditional depictions of good and evil, Smith’s conversion is a kind of black virus that spreads throughout the victim, while Neo’s is a white one. Consequently, there is a second pun here on computer viruses, which functions both as a reference back to Smith’s comparison of humans to disease and forward to the resolution of the third film which relies on the motif of computer viruses.

that there is no way to actually verify the existence of an external world and no way to be completely sure that what he experiences is real or know how he should interpret it.²⁴

Consequently, he cannot be sure that the role thrust upon him is what it *seems* to be, that of a messiah and hero. In a film anchored in epistemological questions, there is a twisted logic in the thought that the Antichrist might not even know he is the Antichrist, or might be in the process of discovering it.²⁵ It is therefore appropriate that that audience should share Neo's doubts, particularly since their own viewing situation replicates Neo's ignorance: they, too, are being manipulated by the directors who may or may not be giving them 'true' information which would allow them to interpret what they are seeing correctly, a point to which I will return.

Yet one thing remains problematic in both the human and machine vision of Apocalypse, and this is how both visions of New Jerusalem contradict a point which is made repeatedly throughout the trilogy: that machines and man have now grown dependent on one another and true separation is no longer possible.

This problem is implied in *The Matrix* but made explicit in *Reloaded* in a conversation between Neo and Councilor Hamann in which Hamann points out that without machines to monitor their air, lights, water and heat, human survival would not be possible.

Neo's knowledge of how the A.I. uses humans as its energy source leads him to see that the machines are equally dependent on mankind. Even when the Architect explains to Neo that if he does not return to the mainframe, it will result in a system crash which will kill everyone connected to the matrix, Neo is skeptical: 'You won't let it happen. You can't.

²⁴ Descartes also reasoned that we all have 'an idea of God as an all-powerful, all-good, and infinite being implanted in our minds, and that this idea could only have *from* God' (Grau), an argument that resonates with the interpretation that the A.I. is the deity figure.

²⁵ Keanu Reeves, who plays Neo, has acted in a film based on just this scenario: in *The Devil's Advocate* he plays an attorney who eventually learns that he is the Devil's son.

You need human beings to survive' (*Reloaded*). And though the Architect tells Neo that 'There are levels of survival we are prepared to accept', suggesting that the relationship is not symbiotic as Neo believes, we later learn that Neo is correct. In *Revolutions*, he tells the Oracle what the Architect has told him. Her response is dismissive:

Please. You and I may not be able to see beyond our own choices, but that man can't see past any choice....He doesn't understand them, he can't. To him they are variables and equations. One at a time each must be solved and counted. That's his purpose: to balance the equation.²⁶

The symbiotic relationship has already been implied in the very fact that most humans are literally connected to the A.I. Even those who have been 'freed' are implanted with technology which allows them to interact with the matrix. Anticipating one reviewer's sense that the final film 'could also find some other path...that may bring hackers, humans and machines together' (Rothstein, 'Philosophers'), the filmmakers pursue the synthesis of the two worlds and species through the trilogy to much the same conclusion that David Porush has reached when he writes that 'the result of the inscription of a utopian vision onto a human is a cyborg: a natural organism linked for its survival and improvement to a cybernetic system' (122). Thus, the third film of the trilogy, *Revolutions*, suggests yet a third apocalyptic reading, a cyborg one.

Just as cyborgs are a synthesis of parts, we find that both Neo and Agent Smith are progressively becoming a synthesis of both species during the trilogy. Perhaps more relevant, in learning that they are literally connected to one another, we see that one cannot exist without the other as a complement. The Oracle explains to Neo that Agent Smith is

²⁶ The Oracle's skepticism appears well-founded: the Architect's comment to her at the end of *Revolutions* - 'You played a dangerous game' - suggests he was engaged in a bluff of some sort.

‘you, your opposite, your negative, the result of the equation trying to balance itself out’ (*Revolutions*). Hence, there is an equally symbiotic relationship between the two characters. Furthermore, since one or the other will always play the role of deity or Antichrist in an apocalyptic reading, and will always be complemented by his other half, we may draw the conclusion not only that each character is equally likely to be deity or Antichrist depending on the perspective adopted, but also that God and Antichrist have a similar symbiotic relationship, just as men and machine have in the *Matrix* world.

This yin/yang concept is echoed in another pair of characters in the trilogy: the Oracle and Architect. The Architect tells Neo that ‘if I am the father of the matrix, she would undoubtedly be its mother’ (*Reloaded*).²⁷ In this parent analogy is contained the suggestion that these opposite parts, these nemeses, are both needed to create a whole. The Oracle confirms this relationship when she indicates that while the Architect’s function is to balance the equation, it is her job to unbalance it (*Revolutions*). Since both characters are themselves interpretable as deity figures within the matrix (as creators, destroyers and manipulators of it), their relationship parallels the complementary apocalyptic roles and relationship of Neo and Smith in the ‘real’ world.

The re-conception here of apocalyptic counterparts as complementary rather than strictly oppositional reveals the same approach to the problem of good and evil that Alan Moore adopts in *Swamp Thing*, a position that posits one is not possible without the other. In other words, they are symbiotic. Furthermore, *The Matrix* trilogy also suggests the same return to cyclical time which other contemporary authors have adopted in their re-workings of apocalypse (Bassham 115). That cyclical time structure is implied in the fact that there

²⁷ Smith implies as much when, in *Revolutions*, he responds to the Oracle calling him a bastard with the line, ‘You would know, Mom.’

have been six incarnations of the matrix and Zion thus far. The Architect's comment that the anomaly of The One is ultimately revealed as 'both beginning and end' not only ties the figure of The One to Christ as the Alpha and Omega, but also reinforces a vision of unending and recycling time (*Reloaded*).²⁸

While both Vonnegut and the Wachowski brothers use the trope of evolution to help them visualize a New Jerusalem, their conceptions of evolution start from different places. Vonnegut conceives of evolution turning a single diseased species into a new one which symbolizes his New Jerusalem. The Wachowskis conceive of evolution as symbiosis, the combining of two inadequate species into one which symbolizes New Jerusalem.

That final symbiosis is depicted in *Revolutions*, but extrapolated from *The Matrix* scene in which Neo first dives into Smith's body, thereby introducing the means by which the symbiosis is ultimately achieved. In entering Smith he fundamentally changes him: Smith is resurrected but 'changed...a new man, so to speak, like you, apparently free' (*Reloaded*). He is now 'unplugged' from the larger A.I. consciousness and free to make his own choices, and in that freedom not only achieves a necessary component for the Christian salvation but also becomes more human-like. Every time that Smith copies himself in *Reloaded* he repeats this process, absorbing and co-opting other individuals in a technological interpretation of evolution which Neo describes wonderingly as 'programs hacking programs'.

Prior to being absorbed herself by Smith, the Oracle tells Neo, 'One way or another, Neo, this war is going to end. Tonight, the future of both worlds will be in your hands or in

²⁸ Cf. the Oracle's ominous warning that 'Everything that has a beginning has an end. I see the end coming. I see the darkness spreading. I see death. And you are all that stands in his way' (*Revolutions*). Where the Architect's statement suggests cyclical time, the Oracle's relies on the Christian linear and finite view of time. Their contradicting statements maintain their oppositional balance/unbalance functions, however.

his' (*Revolutions*). In order for there to be a plot resolution there must be a literal one, a New Jerusalem achieved through a pun on the word 'resolution'. That final symbiosis takes place during the showdown between Neo and Smith in the third film where, in keeping with their computer-based world, the Wachowskis have achieved the symbiosis through the metaphor of a computer virus spread by a Trojan horse attack.²⁹

Smith has grown uncontrollable, a fact which Neo points out to the computer mainframe at the Source.³⁰ The mainframe cannot control Smith any longer since the agent is unplugged and therefore beyond direction figuratively and literally. Neo, however, knows he can access Smith. As The One, Neo has qualities of the machine world which allow him to interact with the machine world in ways other humans cannot. More importantly, Neo is *part* of Smith, and therefore has an access which neither A.I. nor humans have now. The A.I. agrees to work with Neo, allowing a connection to be made directly to itself and then jacking Neo into the matrix to fight Smith. In what amounts to a simulation of a Trojan horse computer attack, the A.I. can get to Smith using Neo as the backdoor.³¹

In the fight scene, Neo again dives into Smith with the words 'You were right, Smith. You were always right. It was inevitable.' The use of this word 'inevitable' sends the audience to two previous scenes. The first is Smith's speech about evolution being inevitable, and the second is Smith's continuing jibe that Neo's death is inevitable, both

²⁹ The Wachowskis' own ambivalence about religion may be revealed in the fact that the process which Smith uses is simultaneously described through the discourses of 'conversion' and 'infection'. Commenting on Morpheus' zealot nature they have said, 'There's something dangerous about people who believe they have the truth; they do sort of act blindly' ('The Making of *The Matrix*').

³⁰ The A.I.'s appearance recalls similar images in *The Wizard of Oz*, a book which in its own way is both apocalyptic (in the world which it destroys upon Dorothy's waking) and about a kind of symbiosis (since the characters of Oz and Kansas turn out to be the same people). It also references a nearly identical image in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when the alien mothership first appears.

³¹ There may be a literal code which is downloaded into Neo, though it is never explained. Earlier the Architect tells Neo that he carries a code within him which must be downloaded into the mainframe, implying he may be a code-carrier, another play on the idea of virus and disease.

hinting at the final symbiosis which occurs here and the resulting 'death' of the two separate characters who symbolize the individual species.³² This literal symbiosis allows a figurative one to occur in the real world: peace between the machines and humans.

There is some evidence that the filmmakers intended this resolution by symbiosis all along. At the end of *The Matrix* Neo calls the A.I. with a warning that he is going to wake the people attached to it, but this is not the original version of the phone call. That dialogue reads, in part:

I believe deep down, we both want this world to change. I believe that the Matrix can remain our cage or it can become our chrysalis, that's what you helped me to understand. That to be free, truly free, you cannot change your cage. You have to change yourself....But now, I see another world. A different world where all things are possible. A world of hope. Of peace. (Lamm 393)

The reference to changing oneself recalls an earlier moment in which one of the Potentials shows Neo a spoon he has bent by thought and tells him, 'It is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself' (*Matrix*). Ultimately it is this personal change, the evolution into a new life form, which allows the predicted new world of hope and peace to come into existence. The chrysalis image further suggests impending change since it indicates an in-between stage of growth.

Neo, who has 'taken on the sins' of both species and died for them in order to bring this better world, is then taken by a machine barge into a brilliant city in the Source, the same place he has described to Trinity as 'Light everywhere, like the whole thing was built with light' (*Revolutions*). The barge imagery is reminiscent of Avalon and Arthurian ties to

³² Seraph's observation that 'you can never truly know someone until you fight them' comes to literal fruition in this scene.

Christian mythology, but the city itself is right out of the Book of Revelation with its description of the shining city of New Jerusalem.

What is interesting about this resolution is that in many ways it refuses to resolve. Though both machine and Zionites are beneficiaries of Neo's sacrifice, *they* don't inherit the New Jerusalem which is pictured in the Machine City. The Architect agrees that he will free the humans 'who want out' but this implies there will be people who choose not to be freed. In a paradigm whose traditional aim is the End of time, the conclusion of the film suggests that it is anything but a conclusive end: the Oracle tells Sati that she suspects they will see Neo again some day, a suspicion the audience may share considering the Avalon allusion. Moreover, when the Architect asks her how long she thinks this peace will last, she replies 'As long as it can', suggesting it is far from an eternal solution (*Revolutions*).

This refusal to resolve completely may be the unintentional result of the filmmakers' use of pastiche, or it may be deliberate. There is money to be made in a franchise, after all. Nevertheless, I'd argue that the open-endedness of the trilogy is a result of its postmodern approach and epistemological grounding, and is nonetheless logical in its own way. The world of the matrix is inherently apocalyptic in that we know that it has been destroyed and rebuilt as a better world at least five times before Neo's arrival. The final comments of the Oracle and Architect leave open the possibility that this process could continue, though not at this immediate moment. The alternative portrayals of Neo and Smith as The One also suggest that there *is* no 'One', only variations on it. Neo's continuing doubts up until the final moment, combined with Smith's tortured, existential speech in the showdown demanding to know why Neo continues to fight in the face of the inevitable, seems to point

to the conclusion that we can never know whether we are The One and never know our true purpose.³³

This motif of knowing, so central to the trilogy, is therefore extended to the audience itself. The instability and indeterminacy within the trilogy directly mimics Neo's own experience of not knowing how to interpret what he experiences. The viewer is, to some extent, in the same position as the point-of-view character. We are ultimately as uncertain how to read events and identities as Neo is.

This uncertainty is compounded by the remarkable technology used to create the film. The trilogy is a perfect example of the kind of movie-making technology that Scott Bukatman ironically notes is a 'product of the very technologies that the narrative attempts to explain and ground' (14).³⁴ New computer technologies such as Computer Graphic Imaging (CGI) make it nearly impossible to tell which among the hundred Smiths of the playground fight scene is the real one, for example (Devin Gordon). These new technologies inherently test the audience's sense of the 'real' and self-consciously call attention to the very nature of watching film since it, too, involves a level of manipulation on the part of the filmmakers who must convince an audience sitting in a dark room that they are watching another (real) 'world'.

When Neo is first plucked from the matrix and views himself in a cracked mirror which begins to melt before his eyes, or when Morpheus holds out the blue and red pills to

³³ Smith seems obsessed with the idea of purpose. He accuses Neo of taking purpose from him and attacks him in an effort to get a purpose back. See the playground fight scene in *Reloaded*. But the existential problem of defining purpose is a keynote of the trilogy. At various times, Morpheus, the Keymaker, Ram-Kendra and the Oracle all talk about it. The self-doubt which Smith expresses here, and Neo expresses elsewhere, make both characters examples of the kind of 'doubting' gods whom Moore depicts in *Watchmen*.

³⁴ Though as David Edelstein notes, *The Matrix* further complicates this issue. In the dojo scene of the first film, for instance, the dojo is a *simulated* environment to train the characters in kung-fu, but the actors had to *really* train for three months in order to do the fighting required, and during the scene *real* fly-wires were used to simulate *unreal* moments of gravity-free action.

Neo and one is reflected in the left eye of his sunglasses and the other in the right (a physical impossibility), these effects are so realistic looking that they force the audience to question, like Neo, the way things appear to be. More relevant are effects, such as the blue pill/red pill reflection, which are accepted as real by the audience. Like Neo's 'splinter in the mind', an audience may sense something wrong with this image, but unless they know something about optics they may not know that what they have seen *can't* be real. Hence, there is more than one level of irony in Morpheus' last line 'Is this real?'

The process of watching *The Matrix* movies deliberately replicates Neo's dilemma. Thus it is the technology of movie-making – in this case a movie about the danger of technology - which provides a tangible example of Baudrillard's argument that it is no longer possible to distinguish between nature and artifice (Felluga 87).³⁵ Like apocalypse then, this idea has real-life implications which *Matrix* special effects creator John Gaeta anticipates when he says, 'The subtleties of reality manipulation...[are] becoming denser and more sophisticated and more intimidating every day....the visual effects technicians of today will be the social engineers' of tomorrow' (Edelstein).

Baudrillard has posited that myth 'invades cinema as imaginary content' during violent periods of contemporary history (43), and Andy Wachowski has said that one of the things the brothers were interested in when they wrote the script for *The Matrix* was 'making mythology relevant in a modern context' (Weinraub). In tying the apocalyptic paradigm to a futuristic world of artificially intelligent machines which extrapolates from contemporary debates about authenticity, simulation, and epistemology, they achieve this aim.

³⁵ See Merrin for more on Baudrillard's film theory and the recreation of the 'real' in films such as *Titanic* or *Saving Private Ryan*.

Yet the trilogy may be of more interest for its handling of the problem of contemporary apocalyptic representation through its use of the trope of the cyborg. At the beginning of this chapter I wrote that the Wachowskis were inheritors of two separate apocalyptic traditions, that of the computer-gone-berserk and that of the internalized apocalypse. In the figure of the cyborg, we find the computer or machine *is* internalized, the computer becoming part of the human internal landscape. Thus, the hybrid figure of the cyborg stands as a representation of these two traditions melded into a single form. On a different level, the cyborg figures of *The Matrix* also imply a postmodern sensibility in much the same way that Adam Roberts has noted in the cyborg figure of the Borg of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Roberts argues that the radical Otherness represented in the Borg has theoretical ties to the postmodern idea of 'rhizomatic' logic, a system of world comprehension that, rather than being centred and hierarchical, is root-like, branching out simultaneously in multiple directions and thus creating interesting connections (165). This rhizomatic logic, I would suggest, offers another potentially fruitful way of thinking about *The Matrix* trilogy, and is complementary to the (postmodern) concept of indeterminacy which is part of understanding the narrative as a constantly mutating text with an unstable interpretative frame.

The lack of a single, stable 'roster' of apocalyptic characters, the shifting point-of-view, and the epistemological theme all lead a viewer to even more complex questions about the apocalyptic paradigm. But all of these questions – How do we tell deity and Devil apart? What does it mean to be good or evil? Can one of these things exist without the other to counterbalance it? – are subsumed by the question that Don DeLillo explores in his novel Underworld: Why apocalypse?

A Sense of The Ending: Don DeLillo's Apocalyptic Novels

‘When the Old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith?’

Mao II (7)

The Wachowski Brothers revitalized the apocalyptic paradigm by persistently shifting its point of view, but they and the other artists discussed so far are still, in their way, re-telling the story of Apocalypse. Don DeLillo has adopted a completely different approach. He focuses instead on the metaphysical element of the paradigm: the *idea* of apocalypse, rather than the story. His interest is not how the paradigm might be translated into secular terms. In fact, his novels assume that this is a foregone conclusion and that the Bomb has replaced the deity figure. Instead, DeLillo's interest has always been the role of apocalyptic sensibility in our lives. In three novels, End Zone, White Noise and Underworld, DeLillo explores how apocalypticism permeates our contemporary lives and the ramifications of that permeation.

Because the atomic bomb haunts DeLillo's work, lurking in the background as a cause of modern, collective angst and spiritual malaise, it would be easy to see his work as part of the relatively recent apocalyptic tradition of nuclear fiction.¹ Long before there actually was an atomic bomb, writers were positing the End by atomic warfare or its related fall-out. Paul Brians identifies the first nuclear holocaust story as the 1895 novel The Crack of Doom by Robert Cromie, but the more frequently cited first atomic war story is H.G.

¹ While the Bomb is an unspoken presence in White Noise, it is the airborne toxic event which is the focus of apocalyptic terror. But the killer cloud is also the result of man-made technologies, toxic chemicals, and as DeLillo has affirmed elsewhere, ‘all technology is the Bomb’ (Howard 15).

Wells' The World Set Free (1914).² The trope of a nuclear End has been eagerly embraced ever since.

The range of attitudes and moods in this genre extend from the melancholy dirges of Neville Shute's On the Beach (1957), Helen Clarkson's The Last Day (1959), and Mordecai Roshwald's Level 7 (1959), to the comedic japes of Stanley Kubrick's classic film *Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Pat Frank's Alas, Babylon (1959) and Ray Bradbury's stories 'The Highway', 'The Last Night of the World', and The Martian Chronicles (1950) exhibit the resigned pessimism which is endemic in the genre, while Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz (1960) is one of the few examples of nuclear holocaust fiction which is deliberately and studiously evocative of the Christian eschatology from which it is derived, as well as conscientious in delivering a New Jerusalem. Russell Hoban's excellent Riddley Walker (1981) is a more recent example of nuclear holocaust fiction, but it is clear that the genre has largely moved into film, with a particular resurgence in the 1980s when Ronald Reagan was president of the United States. A partial list of films, including *Failsafe* (1964), *War Games* (1982), the 1983 made-for-TV movies *Testament* and *The Day After*, 1984's *The Terminator* and its sequels, *Deterrence* (2000), *Thirteen Days* (2001), and 2002's *The Sum of All Fears*, intimates how enduring and present the fear of nuclear disaster is.

It is perhaps not surprising that so much of the fiction was written mid-century since, as Daniel L. Zins has pointed out, we live in an age which started in 1945 with the Bomb and in which our continued existence is a question ('Exploding the Canon' 14-15). During the twenty years following the bombing of Japan, the atomic bomb was strongly present in

² Paul Briens has put together a remarkable bibliography of nuclear disaster fiction. Though his focus is on science fiction, his annotated list of fiction built around nuclear war or accident is an important source for scholars of the genre.

cultural awareness. Hiroshima, John Hershey's shocking exposé of the devastating effect of that attack, was first published in 1946. In 1951, the Russians conducted their own atomic tests, initiating the Cold War. In 1957, the Russians put the first satellite, Sputnik, into space, exacerbating American fears about a technologically advanced enemy, and in 1962 those fears were nearly played out during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Masuji Ibuse's 1966 book Black Rain, based on diaries and interviews with Hiroshima survivors, indicated that anxiety over the Bomb was still percolating through the culture. It is no surprise that nuclear fiction was one result of this fear, nor that DeLillo himself should locate much of his apocalyptic novel Underworld during this time.³

In his work on apocalypticism and the ascetic ideal in End Zone, Mark Osteen argues that DeLillo's work revolves around nuclearism, the religion of nuclear weapons, in which the main tenet 'is the ascetic ideal of the Bomb's "purifying function"' ('Against the End' 152). While it is true, particularly in Underworld, that the Bomb has this religious aura, the Bomb is also a convenient means to an end. For DeLillo, the thermonuclear device may be a tangible symbol of the End, but what interests him is not the symbol as such, or its potential to be realized, but our response to it.

Hence, it would be a simplification to identify DeLillo merely as an inheritor of the nuclear fiction tradition. His work owes less to that genre, perhaps, and more to the theological branch of philosophy called eschatology because he is more interested in examining the metaphysics of Ends, rather than plotting them. DeLillo himself has noted that 'there is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood' (Passaro).

³ Cf. Robert Coover's The Public Burning which locates the anxiety in the Rosenberg 'atom spy' trial nearly a decade before the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Consequently, Osteen's argument that the purpose of DeLillo's nuclearism is to undermine apocalypticism cannot be taken as a general rule. Rather, the opposite seems to be true if one examines the complete body of DeLillo's apocalyptic works. More precisely, Osteen's argument is convincing enough if applied solely to End Zone, with its strange non-ending and obsession with nuclear war, but less so when applied to DeLillo's apocalyptic works overall. End Zone is merely the beginning of a career-long examination of apocalypticism.

DeLillo's apocalyptic work is probably more usefully situated against the ideas of writers and scholars such as D.H. Lawrence and Frank Kermode. In his 1932 work Apocalypse, Lawrence suggests that contrary to common sense, modern man is far more afraid of apocalypse *not* occurring than occurring, an idea which DeLillo makes tangible in his depiction of Marvin Lundy in Underworld. Lawrence's paradox turns on the potential of apocalypse to make sense of History and Time, even though it narrates the End of both.

Equally important, though, are Frank Kermode's observations about Endings in his seminal work The Sense of an Ending. Kermode takes up many strands of thought about endings, both philosophical and narrative, but the ones which are most relevant to a study of DeLillo's writing are those in which he examines the change in our interpretation of the End from a single moment of crisis to an ongoing crisis, and those in which he scrutinizes the sense-making potential in the apocalyptic myth.

Kermode's analysis of the myth of crisis focuses on the change, starting with St. John, St. Paul, and St. Augustine, in seeing Apocalypse not as imminent, but immanent. This observation is an important one for DeLillo's work, where the immanence of the End is consistently part of the background, but becomes more noticeable in his apocalyptic novels.

That immanence is a major cultural characteristic during the 1950s and 1960s about which DeLillo writes in Underworld, but it is also something which he himself still senses in contemporary culture. Asked about the apocalyptic feel to his books, DeLillo commented:

This is the shape my books take because this is the reality I see. This reality has become part of all our lives over the past twenty-five years. I don't know how we can deny it.... [My books are] *about* movements or feelings in the air and in the culture around us, without necessarily being *part* of the particular movement. I mean, what I sense is suspicion and distrust and fear, and so, of course, these things inform my books. (DeCurtis 66)⁴

DeLillo's comment bears out Kermode's argument that the apocalyptic paradigm continues to inspire and fascinate, even in its changed form, because it 'lies under our ways of making sense of the world' (28) and 'still represents a mood finally inseparable from the condition of life, the contemplation of its necessary ending, the ineradicable desire to make some sense of it' (187). Kermode writes:

Men in the midst make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle. (17)⁵

We shall continue to have a relation with the paradigms, but we shall change them to make them go on working. If we cannot break free of them, we must make sense of them. (24)

⁴ Elsewhere DeLillo has made similar comments about the paranoia apparent in his novels, saying he has 'drawn this element out of the air around' him, and that paranoia acts for his characters as 'a form of religious awe' in which institutions like the C.I.A. are 'like churches that hold the final secrets' (Begley 303).

⁵ Kermode uses 'midst' here to indicate a time between, a period of waiting between beginnings and expected ends. For more on this see his discussion of *chronos*, 'passing time', and *kairos*, a point in time 'charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end' (47). It strikes me as potentially fruitful to think about Kermode's claim as it applies to the work which has been done on conspiracy and contingency in DeLillo's novels, particularly Libra.

It is this line of thought that DeLillo seems to pick up in Underworld, a novel in which any number of characters are 'looking for a faith to embrace' and trying to make sense of it all. Underworld will go further than this, however, and embrace a different assertion by Kermode that 'our interest in [ends] reflects our deep need for intelligible Ends. We project ourselves...past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle' (8).

Underworld is a novel which is occupied with Endings and how they affect our lives, but it is not DeLillo's first eschatological work. End Zone and White Noise are also eschatological novels which explore different aspects of apocalypticism. In them, one can see a natural trajectory to Underworld, a novel which deals with the larger metaphysical issue of what we stand to gain or lose by our apocalypticism.

Though some might claim that DeLillo's first novel Americana is not completely without its own sense of apocalypticism, it is really in his second novel End Zone that DeLillo first takes on eschatology as a topic. Not coincidentally, it is also a novel in which nuclear war is foregrounded.

Writing about the kinds of strategies a writer has available to him in order to portray the dreadfulness of nuclear disaster, David Dowling lists among them 'skirting round the perimeter' of the topic since the 'magnitude of nuclear threat naturally ties the tongue'; the satirising of the concept; the 'internalising of the nuclear crisis' as a sign of the enormity of the emotional stress caused by the idea; and 'surrounding the inexpressible with verbal strategies, hemming it in so that our reading experience includes a sense of an ominous chasm of silence and brooding ignorance' (5-14).

Belying the notion that a writer must choose only one of these strategies, DeLillo uses all of them in End Zone. The result is that he is able not merely to get at the inexpressibility of nuclear disaster (and by proxy, apocalypse), but also to examine some of the consequences that obsession with the End might produce.⁶ As DeLillo has said, End Zone is not about football but 'about extreme places and extreme states of mind' (DeCurtis 57).

Gary Harkness, a football player at Logos college and the novel's narrator, is obsessed with nuclear war and its details and language. He is, as Osteen has noted, an ascetic character, a self-imposed exile who walks in circles every day in the Texan desert, forcing himself to imagine scenes of nuclear devastation to free himself from his fascination with the awful End.

This practice filled me with self-disgust and was meant, eventually, to liberate me from the joy of imagining millions dead. In time, I assumed, my disgust would become so great that I would be released from all sense of global holocaust. But it wasn't working. I continued to look forward to each new puddle of destruction....I seemed to be subjecting my emotions to an unintentioned cycle in which pleasure nourished itself on the black bones of revulsion and dread. (End Zone 34)

The strategy DeLillo uses here of creating an apocalypticist character in order to examine the premise of apocalypse is one to which he will return again and again. There is little doubt that Gary is supposed to be this prophet of the End. The reader notes the linguistic tie of his surname to the biblically-charged verb 'hark', his fascination with the

⁶ This idea of 'inexpressibility' is also a concern of Holocaust literature, a link which DeLillo seems to be aware of since White Noise has strong connections to the Holocaust through Jack's Hitler Studies and his desire to learn German. Dowling's rhetorical strategies could as easily be applied to representations of the Holocaust as to nuclear war.

language and images of the End, his exiled status, and his confession that he has 'been plagued by joyous visions of apocalypse' (End Zone 183).⁷

Neither is there any doubt that the Bomb is the surrogate deity in this fantasy.⁸

DeLillo is quite explicit about it, giving Major Staley, who is Gary's tutor in all things nuclear and whose father was a crewmember on the Nagasaki mission, the following speech:

There's a kind of theology at work here. The bombs are a kind of god. As his power grows, our fear naturally increases. I get as apprehensive as anyone else, maybe more so. We have too many bombs. They have too many bombs. There's a kind of theology of fear that comes out of this. We begin to capitulate to the overwhelming presence. It's so powerful. It dwarfs us so much. We say let the god have his way. He's so much more powerful than we are. Let it happen, whatever he ordains. It used to be that the gods punished men by using the forces of nature against them or by arousing them to take up their weapons and destroy each other. Now god is the force of nature itself, the fusion of tritium and deuterium. Now he's the weapon. So maybe this time we went too far in creating a being of omnipotent power. All this hardware. Fantastic stockpiles of hardware. The big danger is that we'll surrender to a sense of inevitability and start flinging mud all over the planet. (End Zone 62)

Though End Zone contains numerous discussions about apocalyptic subject matter,⁹

DeLillo's specific apocalyptic interest in this text appears to be whether there can truly be a language to describe the End. It is by working through this idea that DeLillo is able to use so many of the strategies which Dowling lists.

⁷ Gary has a literary precursor in Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Walter Percy's novel The Movie-goer, another novel sometimes considered apocalyptic. Bolling, too, secretly hopes for the end of the world, saying 'what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall' (228).

⁸ The atomic bomb is a constant background to the narrative, revealed in details such as the mushroom cloud appliqué on Myna's dress. Moreover, the comparison of Coach Creed to Ahab alludes to another novel often considered apocalyptic, Moby Dick. The title End Zone does double duty as well, indicating the topic of the narrative beyond football.

⁹ See Anatole's comments about the fulfillment which can result from destruction, for one example (End Zone 177).

Through scenes such as those in which Gary and Major Staley discuss the obscure language used to describe nuclear warfare, DeLillo gives examples of both an ‘inexpressible verbal strategy’ and how this sort of language is a form of avoidance. The suggestion here is that language is a failed strategy for describing or managing the End. As Gary notes, ‘Major, there’s no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language....They don’t explain, they don’t clarify, they don’t express. They’re painkillers. Everything becomes abstract’ (End Zone 66).

In these same exchanges, DeLillo is clearly satirizing the military’s efforts to ‘sanitize’ or ‘purify’ nuclear war, to somehow make it more palatable or manageable. Gary knows from his reading and tells the reader exactly how unmanageable this Ending is.

Finally, Gary ultimately *does* internalize this apocalyptic crisis, turning his eschatologically-bent thoughts inward and starving himself into a hospital bed. It is in this state of ruin that DeLillo concludes the novel, bringing to awful fruition something which Gary has said in the beginning: ‘It was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings’ (End Zone 14).

DeLillo emphasizes the futility of using language to describe apocalypse in one further way. In a novel in which an analogy is drawn between nuclear war and football, both as types of battle and as games, Gary’s school, Logos College, *loses* its biggest game. This loss functions to satirize and reverse the usual sports novel narrative, but it also functions metaphorically: a college named for the Word loses its biggest battle. In this failure, DeLillo suggests that language cannot contain the End,¹⁰ and iterates a theme which

¹⁰ Though Cf. Osteen who has argued that DeLillo not only intends an analogy between nuclear war and football, but that he also has structured End Zone along the same lines as the typical nuclear disaster narrative with ‘part 1[building] to a confrontation, the middle section [detailing] the “war”, and part 3 [describing] the aftermath’ (‘Against the End’ 161).

Dowling points out is common to the apocalyptic genre and to the Book of Revelation in particular: the limitations of language in describing the 'indescribable', what is 'beyond words' (121).

In White Noise, his second explicitly apocalyptic novel, DeLillo continues to explore the role of language in apocalypticism, but focuses instead on a different aspect of the topic: how apocalypse has become a private rather than communal event. Kermode notes that St. Augustine observed long ago that 'anxieties about the end are, in the end, anxieties about one's own end' (186). Writing of changing notions of crisis and the ways in which the apocalyptic paradigm continues to be modified, Kermode writes, 'The End [people] imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations....the End is a figure for their own deaths' (7). He explains

the way the type figures were modified, made to refer not to a common End but to personal death or to crisis, or to epoch....literary fictions changed in the same way – perpetually recurring crises of the person, and the death of that person, took over from myths which purport to relate one's experience to grand beginnings and ends. (35)

In White Noise, all crises do become personal, and all the feared endings private terrors about individual deaths. The larger, more communal, sense of apocalyptic crisis exists but is relegated to a pervasive undercurrent in daily life. 'Dying,' says Murray Siskind, the narrator's friend and fellow academic, 'is a quality of the air. It's everywhere and nowhere' (DeLillo, White Noise 38). The narrator, Jack Gladney, often comments on this feeling of crisis. He notes, for instance, that the town is full of obese people and that 'When times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat' (White Noise 14). He wonders

whether his and his wife's compulsive thoughts about who will die first are 'some inert element in the air we breathe, a rare thing like neon' (White Noise 15). Heinrich, Jack's son, refuses to watch the sunsets 'because he believed there was something ominous' in them (White Noise 61), and disaster footage on TV exerts an inexplicable hold on everyone's imagination in the novel, a tendency that Jack worries about, saying 'Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping' (White Noise 64). And again: 'I did not feel Armageddon in my bones but I worried about all those people who did, who were ready for it, wishing hard, making phone calls and bank withdrawals. If enough people want it to happen, will it happen?' (White Noise 137).¹¹ A reader would be entitled to suspect that this pervasive catastrophism *is* the white noise of the title.

Nonetheless, while this sense of ominous future haunts the novel, the crises depicted are localized, whittled down to the individual: a seven hour crying jag by Wilder; the sudden death of a colleague; a grade school evacuated; an averted plane crash. The toxic cloud exposure, an event which potentially affects the entire community, is largely viewed through the effect it has on a single character, Jack. The apocalypse in question is not cosmic, nor even communal: Jack does not think about the exposure in terms of 'we, the community', only in terms of 'I, Jack Gladney'. It has become, as Kermode predicted, a matter of an individual ending.

But the reduction of apocalypse to this individual level allows DeLillo to explore potential responses to apocalyptic fears. If End Zone is interested in whether apocalypse can

¹¹ The atomic bomb is a presence in this work, too, though it is not the focal point of the apocalyptic tension. One of Babette's ex-husbands is working for the Nuclear Accident Readiness Foundation which he says is 'Basically a legal defense fund for the industry. Just in case kind of thing' (White Noise 56), and SIMUVAC, cautioning its volunteers about showing too much enthusiasm during the simulation emergency, announces, 'Save your tender loving care for the nuclear fireball in June' (White Noise 206). The Bomb is also evoked in the descriptions of the toxic cloud, called a 'towering mass' and a 'feathery plume' (White Noise 111).

be contained (described/understood) by language, White Noise is interested in whether it can be denied. One of DeLillo's inspirations for White Noise was Ernest Becker's The Denial of Death, an exploration of our culture's inability to come to terms with death and the resulting dread which has become a cultural force (Cowart, Don DeLillo 77-8). White Noise is ostensibly about this denial of death, on an individual and mythic level.

It is central to the thematic design of White Noise that its apocalyptic fears are not borne out. Despite his paralyzing fear of dying and his exposure to the toxic cloud, Jack does *not* die. In fact he tells his doctor he feels better than ever. The plane doesn't crash. The authorities are digging up yards and dragging rivers looking for dead bodies which aren't there. The missing-and-feared-dead Treadwells are found alive, if disoriented. Schools re-open. Mylar-clad men never find anything in their tests for dangerous chemicals. And SIMUVAC continues rehearsing for disasters that don't happen. Indeed, the one event which might actually be apocalyptic, the airborne toxic event, is undermined by the two absurd conversations that Jack has with the authorities trying to determine how much danger he has been exposed to. The comedy of these two scenes suggests that DeLillo is actually poking fun at apocalyptic fear, rather than accepting it outright. One notes that the comedy stems from Jack's inability to extract any information out of the prodigious number of words he is hearing, and thus depicts the comic, reverse side of the tragic language crisis which Gary ponders when he notes the impossibility of describing certain 'indescribable' things. Here, as in the scene with the 'survivors' of the averted plane crash, DeLillo depicts the intensity of our desire to describe such 'indescribable' things, as well as the unsatisfactory and comic results of attempts to do so.

Irrespective of whether the apocalyptic fear is justified in White Noise, it is clear that DeLillo wants to examine strategies people adopt for dealing with it. The most obvious of these is denial, a strategy which becomes clear in the revelation that Jack and Babette spend a lot of time *not* talking about their fear of dying even though it is such a compulsive thought that it drives one of them to turn herself into a human guinea pig and the other to attempted murder. When the couple do talk about it, they talk around the topic in what Jack recognizes is a silly, competitive way:

She claims my death would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in mine. This is the level of our discourse. The relative size of holes, abysses and gaps. We have serious arguments on this level. She says if her death is capable of leaving a large hole in my life, my death would leave an abyss in hers, a great yawning gulf. I counter with a profound depth or void. And so it goes into the night. These arguments never seem foolish at the time. Such is the dignifying power of our topic. (White Noise 101)

In this passage we see DeLillo again examining, as he does in End Zone, the way language fails to describe death and loss. Admittedly, characters often try to resist this failure of language, and one can read Jack's attempts to learn German - a language he wants to use 'as a charm, a protective device' because he 'sensed the deathly power' in it - as an example of this resistance (White Noise 31). But Jack never is able to learn German, just as his conversations with Babette fail to either describe their immanent sense of loss or contain their apocalyptic fear.

The fascination with disaster footage on television suggests yet another method of dealing with apocalyptic fear. Mark Osteen has pointed out how in this novel 'Television frames and distances the chaos inherent in disasters...seeming simultaneously super real and

unreal' ('Against the End' 153). As Jack puts it, 'It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself...It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying' (White Noise 142).

Television, then, becomes a means of managing apocalyptic fear. It puts the viewer outside the event which tangibly represents the eschatological tension and allows a distancing to occur in which the observer no longer feels personally involved.¹² When the toxic spill occurs, Jack notes how until now these disasters always seem to happen *elsewhere*, how unreal it seems that it should be happening to him, in his community.

The same distancing device is at work in the distinctly apocalyptic curriculum of the popular culture department of Jack's university, the College-on-the-Hill, a name no doubt meant to recall John Winthrop's culturally-defining notion of America as a place of millennial hope.¹³ On offer are Hitler studies and seminars on car crashes, and the staff themselves have heated discussions about movie stars who have died violent deaths. The physical distancing that occurs when a television screen is placed between a viewer and the object of his regard could also be said to replicate the dynamic of making a topic the object of academic examination. As Murray points out to Jack when they go to see the most-photographed barn in the world, nobody sees the barn any longer (White Noise 12).

It is the bemusing character Murray whom DeLillo sets up as the analyzer

¹² David Foster Wallace's essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' is one of the more recent and insightful analyses of the relationship of viewer to television.

¹³ See Winthrop's sermon 'A Model of Christian Charity', delivered on the ship the *Arabella* on the way to the New World.

of apocalyptic fear.¹⁴ Murray is a dispassionate observer, an outsider who enters Jack's life shortly before Jack's brush with mortality and who is the recipient of much of Jack's angst throughout the novel. Since he is an academic accustomed to the kind of distancing mentioned earlier, a cool, dispassionate analysis of apocalyptic fear and possible responses to it seems appropriately seated in his character. That Winnie, another academic at the college, is also given an important speech about the topic would seem to argue for a deliberate choice on DeLillo's part to perform an academic-style dissection of apocalyptic sensibilities.

Winnie enumerates the benefits of Jack's fear of death and, by extrapolation, larger fear of Endings. Telling him that a vision of one's death is part of an extreme, and useful, self-awareness, she argues for the aesthetics of this fear:

Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or a limit. (*White Noise* 228-9)

Winnie's observations here are a vital link in the trajectory to *Underworld* where this particular thought will be examined more closely, but the issue in *White Noise* is not the apocalyptic need for limits, but the responses to apocalypticism. Here, Winnie's thoughts

¹⁴ Murray, however, is not the apocalypticist of this novel. That role is Wilder's. In a novel filled with voices, it is Wilder's silence which stands out, and never more so than when it is broken by his seven hour crying jag, which is described as a 'lament', 'an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony' (*White Noise* 78). The child's name recalls the wilderness which biblical prophets sometimes wander and this association is strengthened by Jack's observation that when he stops crying, 'It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges – a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions' (*White Noise* 79). Additionally, the scene where Wilder rides his tricycle across the highway without getting hit seems to imply that he is somehow protected from injury, as one of God's prophets would be.

serve as background for a long conversation which Murray and Jack have about possible responses.

In a Socratic exchange, Murray leads Jack first to examine Winnie's aesthetic conclusions:

'Do you believe life without death is somehow incomplete?'

'How could it be incomplete? Death is what makes it incomplete'.

'Doesn't our knowledge of death make life more precious?'

'What good is preciousness based on fear and anxiety? It's an anxious quivering thing'.

'True. The most deeply precious things are those we feel secure about. A wife, a child. Does the specter of death make a child more precious?'

'No'.

'No. There is no reason to believe life is more precious because it is fleeting. Here is a statement. A person has to be told he is going to die before he can begin to live life to the fullest. True or false?'

'False. Once your death is established, it becomes impossible to live a satisfying life'. (White Noise 284-5)

Having discarded Winnie's premise, they go on to discuss possible responses to what Murray has concluded is a troubling, if commonplace, fear. Murray suggests that one response might be belief in the afterlife, and a second might be to 'put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other' (White Noise 285).

Murray's sense that technology can or does play a vital role in the apocalyptic sensibility is another link to Underworld where technology, in the form of the Bomb, is going to be foregrounded in a way it is not here. His comment that technology can get Jack out of his bind is a thought worthy perhaps of the 'purifying function' Osteen posits when he

writes of the deity function of nuclear weapons in End Zone.¹⁵ However, it is Murray's third proposed response which suggests the link between many of these ideas, and it, too, will also be vital to Underworld.

In theory, violence is a form of rebirth...It's a way of controlling death. A way of gaining the ultimate upper hand. Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live. See how marvelously simple. (White Noise 290-1)

Jack is going to take this faulty premise to heart and provide White Noise with its conclusion. His attempted murder of Mink, during which he is shot as well, is not only morally repugnant, but also tangible, comedic proof – because Jack botches the attempt - that Murray's theory about killers is wrong: sometimes in a violent show-down the 'killer' gets killed, too. It is exactly this recognition which is the basis of the nuclear deterrence at the heart of the Cold War mentality in Underworld.

Nonetheless, Murray has hit upon a vital recognition, one which D.H. Lawrence had already noted: that this sort of lust for violence may be a pivotal part of the apocalyptic sensibility. Murray's theory about the purpose such violence may serve is as much applicable to apocalyptic texts where the elect who are saved could technically be substituted for the 'killers' and the sinners for the 'diers', as to Jack's personalized apocalyptic fears.

¹⁵ In his article 'Against the End', Osteen paraphrases Ira Chernus on the religious aura of nuclear weapons: 'Nuclear weapons...inspire both awe and dread, and remain mysteriously fascinating both because of their complex technology and because of their seemingly limitless power. The numinousness of nuclear weapons – their mystery and power – induces us to identify with their destructive force, and indeed finally to try to merge with their power by letting them rain down' (151).

Of all his novels, Underworld may be DeLillo's most dense and least focused. Its critical reputation as a masterpiece derives, in part, from the fact that it is so wide-ranging. One might reasonably argue that it is about nostalgia, American angst, personal redemption, nuclear anxiety, the role of art in contemporary life, waste, and a whole host of other topics. However, one of the things which DeLillo clearly *does* want to address in this novel is the role of eschatological expectations in our lives and how such expectations can helpfully offer a sense of meaning and shape to what is otherwise – another theme in the novel – the overwhelming and chaotic amount of information with which we live. To this end, it is most profitably read alongside White Noise. Where White Noise's subject is apocalypse turned private, Underworld expands that notion outward once again to look at how apocalypse as a myth affects the community. Apocalyptic sensibilities here, though, are tied to another of Underworld's prominent themes: the search for pattern and shape in a chaotic world.

In order to explore this theme, DeLillo decides against portraying apocalyptic events, and chooses instead to focus on an event in which apocalypse is disconfirmed: the Cuban Missile Crisis. Like White Noise where the apocalypse never happens, the centerpiece of Underworld is also a non-apocalypse. The Cuban Missile Crisis fails to become the End of the world. DeLillo sets his novel in the fifty or so years in between this moment of expectant End and the permanent end of the Cold War in order to explore exactly how the *idea* of the End permeates and influences our ability to organize reality and shape meaning in our lives.

Underworld's thematic structure realizes Kermode's argument that our need for

coherent ends is made possible only by projecting ourselves beyond the End.¹⁶ In this novel, DeLillo projects the action *past* the (expected) End and then addresses the question of whether notions of the End actually *provide* this structure. By focusing on a disconfirmed apocalypse, DeLillo is able to examine this and several other related apocalyptic topics.

Before proceeding further into the apocalyptic theme of Underworld, however, I want to examine the other related issue of shape and meaning to which it is tied here, for it is perhaps the theme which DeLillo's is most acclaimed for addressing in his body of work. DeLillo, like his peer Thomas Pynchon, has been accused of trafficking in paranoia and conspiracy in his novels (Woods), but it is crucial to understand that when DeLillo writes about conspiracy what interests him is how it acts as a sense-making paradigm. The interconnectedness of events (and whether this connection even exists) is a *leitmotif* in DeLillo's work. Exploring both conspiracy and contingency as organizing principles, Libra, his novel about the Kennedy assassination, is the work in which he most fully develops this theme. Libra posits shadowy groups-within-groups, a host of interconnected people and agendas for whom the nexuses are so deep and secret that even they don't see them, and the novel ultimately suggests that while conspiracy may be actively planned, it is contingency which finally connects events and incidences.¹⁷

This issue of connection resurfaces in Underworld, too, but in an altered form as DeLillo steps away from creating conspiracies or contingency-driven stories and instead

¹⁶ In the afterword of the re-issued The Sense of an Ending, Kermode writes that when he originally gave his lectures in 1965, recent events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cold War, and Kennedy's assassination had contributed to a culture-wide sense of imminent apocalypse. Speaking from a distance of thirty years, Kermode adds, 'We now seem to be less appalled by our knowledge of the Bomb than we were in the sixties. Perhaps we have simply grown accustomed to the idea; or perhaps the end of the Cold War has eased minds all too ready to welcome such remission. Whether we are right to feel so complacent is quite another matter' (183). One might argue, however, that our nuclear fears have been relocated to other kinds of Ends such as environmental or biological.

¹⁷ Skip Willman's article on conspiracy and contingency in Libra is a particularly good examination of the topic.

examines them as sense-making paradigms meant to give shape and meaning to existence.

DeLillo has spoken numerous times about the anxiety produced by the sense of randomness and ambiguity in contemporary life, an anxiety he ties to the Kennedy assassination.

What became unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is not the plot, of course, not the dense mass of characters and events, but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity... (DeLillo, 'American Blood' 22)

The games I've written about have more to do with rules and boundaries than with the freewheeling street games I played when I was growing up. People whose lives are not clearly shaped or marked off may feel a deep need for rules of some kind. People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives (LeClair, Anything Can Happen 81).

Some people prefer to believe in conspiracy because they are made anxious by random acts. Believing in conspiracy is almost comforting because, in a sense, a conspiracy is a story we tell each other to ward off the dread of chaotic and random acts. Conspiracy offers coherence. (Goldstein 56)

The need DeLillo perceives for rules and boundaries becomes important thematically in Underworld, a novel that positions the Cold War and its apocalyptic subtext as a means of providing exactly this kind of structure to understand the world. His two previous apocalyptic novels are similarly concerned with sense-making. End Zone and White Noise are also about attempts to elicit shape out of hazy existence, to find patterns in the chaotic and random data which bombards us. End Zone examines gaming and language as systems which have rules and patterns which we might use as hermeneutic tools, while White Noise

examines technology, religion and violence.¹⁸ The conclusions of both novels indicate the failure of all of these options, a failure to which DeLillo himself refers when he notes that while games potentially ‘provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect’, ‘in my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion’ (LeClair, Anything Can Happen 81).

Nonetheless, the human need for shape and significance reasserts itself again and again in DeLillo’s work. Kermode points out that one of the things men can do in the face of ‘unremembered but imaginable events’ is to ‘imagine a significance in’ those events (4). This is where White Noise acts in part as a prologue for Underworld. End Zone depicts the failure of certain organizational frameworks, but White Noise, as its name implies, depicts the reason why we need them. As DeLillo signals with the repeated motif of the bounteous American supermarket, there is too much of everything in contemporary life: product, fear, advertising, information, noise. Gregory Salyer writes of this overwhelming cornucopia:

The data is there; all that is lacking is an interpretive strategy that will make it come alive. So the question of finding meaning in a world exhausted by interpretation and commodification centres on the will to interpretation and on the availability of viable hermeneutic modes.... (266)

The chaos of seemingly arbitrary data inspires anxiety both in White Noise and in Underworld where Marvin Lundy re-fashions, as it were, Kermode’s idea when he says to his wife: ‘What’s the point of waking up in the morning if you don’t try to match the enormousness of the known forces in the world with something powerful in your own life?’ (Underworld 323).

¹⁸ For an analysis of DeLillo’s fiction according to systems-theory, see Thomas LeClair’s In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel. See Paul Civello for a positioning of DeLillo’s work as anti-Naturalist for comparison.

Lundy is a key character in the apocalyptic subtext of Underworld, since it is he who suggests that apocalypse itself is one way of making organizational sense of the world's confusion. Again, White Noise foreshadows this idea when Murray argues that, 'To plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control' (White Noise 292). Murray is using 'plot' to mean to scheme or plan, but the word has narrative and artistic implications, as well. If we understand apocalypse not merely as an eschatological idea but also as a narrative genre with a plot of its own, one can see DeLillo suggesting that this narrative scheme might be one way to make sense of a seemingly senseless world.¹⁹ In other words, there are mythic schemes by which we might organize our understanding of the world, and apocalypse is one of them.²⁰

DeLillo signals his meaning here by tying apocalypse to the nuclear confrontation of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and by drawing parallels between the binary opposition of the Cold War and the similarly binary apocalyptic struggle between Good and Evil. DeLillo himself has spoken of the Cold War in these terms.

I think we're still trying to understand what happened [during the Cold War]. And what did not happen. In other countries, the signs are tangible...Here, we're not so sure how we ought to feel about it all....I do think, speaking generally, that people may begin to feel a curious loss of a sense of measurable certainty, and even a sense of clearly defined confrontation, which somehow provided a measure for our feelings. Everything was measured in those Cold War years in the most horrendous terms, but you could measure danger, you could measure risk, and the loss of this has led us into a curious period of drift.... (Ulin, 'Merging Myth and History')

¹⁹ In his book The Religion of Science Fiction, Frederick A. Kreuziger argues that this is the *raison d'être* of the apocalyptic genre: 'Apocalypse as story first of all reveals story as that which shapes our search for meaning' (5).

²⁰ DeLillo suggests a number of these hermeneutic frameworks: conspiracy, religion, law and order, gaming. For more on paranoia as a hermeneutic tool see Peter Knight. For gaming, see Neil David Berman, and for football in particular, see William Burke.

In fact the time is coming when we will begin to feel a nostalgia for the Cold War. For its certainties and its biblical sense of awesome confrontation. (Osen)

In Underworld, Klara Sax is the character who voices DeLillo's thought on this topic in her interview with a French journalist.²¹ DeLillo emphasizes the importance of this interview by placing it in the first pages of the first portion of the novel set in the present day. Klara's long monologue on the significance of the Cold War articulates DeLillo's sense of its metaphoric power, and provides a primer to the apocalyptic themes the novel will investigate. However, it is one line of Klara's, almost lost in the rest of the Cold War analysis, which is the real signal to the reader as to the novel's intent.

...now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction....I don't want to disarm the world...Or I do want to disarm the world but I want it be done warily and realistically and in the full knowledge of what we're giving up. (Underworld 76)

It is this last sentence which signals Underworld's apocalyptic subtext, both in plot structure with its organization around an apocalypse which does not occur and its thematic concern with its question What are we giving up? Or to put it another way, what have we lost in losing this myth, for as Kathleen Fitzpatrick points out, in Underworld mythic structures, particularly of the Cold War, have indeed collapsed (152).

²¹ Peter Knight sees Klara's view as confirmation of the paranoia principle at operation in the novel. But he argues, as I do here about the apocalyptic paradigm, that paranoia is operating as a sense-making paradigm (286-7).

Furthermore, in choosing to structure his novel around a disconfirmed apocalypse, DeLillo gives his characters an opportunity to meditate on the purpose of apocalyptic expectation. Primarily he does this through his twinned apocalypticist characters, Lenny Bruce and Marvin Lundy, but Underworld is a novel filled with apocalypticists, and who better to verbalize such contemplation, since apocalyptic prophets can *only* cry their warnings while the apocalypse is still in the future? Apocalypticists can only exist in the face of the impending apocalypse.

Like Mark Osteen who has written on the atomic bomb as the *Deus Otius* in DeLillo's work, Paul Gleason has noted how the nuclear in Underworld takes on a religious aura: 'DeLillo's nuclear wasteland is a place of belief....In Underworld the Cold War...is a period when not God but the atomic bomb functions as a stabilizing, metaphysical presence in which the characters *believe*' (134, italics his). One consequence of living in a time of belief, Gleason argues, is that it also fosters prophets.

These prophetic voices stand out in the novel precisely because they offer hope of some larger hermeneutic tool to interpret and organize a cacophony of information and connections. And here we find DeLillo's long-standing theme of connection reasserting itself as the reason why the apocalyptic paradigm (and its possibilities for organizing reality) is so attractive to people. In the final pages of the novel, DeLillo writes of the internet that 'There are only connections. Everything is connected' (Underworld 825), but the internet is only symptomatic of a larger cultural matrix, a place where, as Peter Knight notes, 'everything is connected but nothing adds up' (291).

Molly Wallace has described Underworld as 'simultaneously sweeping and fragmented, a collection of local moments, many of which are connected through the book

but that do not add up to any coherent whole' (369). Underworld explores the tendency when faced with such incoherency to seek an explanatory paradigm by which to organize the white noise of contemporary life, and it focuses on the apocalyptic paradigm in particular.²²

But once again it is imperative to remember that this is a failed paradigm in the novel. DeLillo's primary interest here is how the idea of apocalypse affects our lives. The expected apocalypse of Underworld does *not* take place, and it is precisely because it does not that DeLillo's characters come to understand the role apocalypticism plays in their lives. The *absence* of the event exposes the paradigm by which the characters are organizing their 'sense-making', and paradoxically, the disconfirmation of the expected apocalypse also exposes the failures of apocalypticism as a sense-making paradigm. Indeed, the suggestion in Underworld as well as in DeLillo's other works is that there *is* no paradigm which will make sense of the overabundant 'noise' which we face in contemporary life. Connections are a matter of chance rather than conspiracy, like the repetition of the orange motif which Peter Knight notes in his article 'Everything is Connected: Underworld's Secret History of Paranoia'.

But the fact that in DeLillo's view such an explanatory paradigm does not exist does not vitiate the *need* for one. In Underworld, Matt Shay's comment that 'everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does' (465) indicates the longing for sense-making in the midst of the same chaos which his brother Nick says fuels Italian *dietrologia*, 'the science for what is behind something' (280). It is because of this longing

²² Libra, on the other hand, examines an alternative sense-making paradigm. In the Lee Harvey Oswald sections such vast information reveals conspiracy at work. Paradoxically, the Nicolas Branch sections of the novel suggest the opposite: that given enough information and enough minute examination, connections are bound to occur simply because of chance.

that people are vulnerable to the mythic paradigm of apocalypse which promises an Ending to complete the Beginning and Middle, and in which all *is* finally made sensible. And it is in this culture of longing that apocalyptists thrive.

Underworld's apocalyptist characters are usually paired. These pairings function in different ways, but usually they serve to bridge religious apocalypse and the secular nuclear analogy.

Proximity of name associates the Prologue's protagonist Cotter Martin with one of the most famous Puritan preachers of American history, Cotton Mather. As one of the most recognizable Puritans, Mather would call to mind the Pilgrims' 'errand in the wilderness', to found the City on the Hill and fulfill their destiny as God's chosen people in the New Jerusalem they believed the New World represented. Cotton Mather's name would thus have certain apocalyptic connotations.

Cotter Martin, on the other hand, is a completely secular figure and the recipient of the game-winning baseball. But baseball is a sign for more than itself in Underworld; it is a sign of the nuclear, as well. DeLillo associates baseball with nuclear war in several different ways. The most obvious of these is in explicitly pairing the moments of the two 'shots heard round the world', the home-run hit and the Soviet atomic bomb test. DeLillo has spoken of his discovery that Hoover attended the famous game in terms which make it clear that the association between baseball and the nuclear is absolutely crucial to the novel. One also notes that he uses the language of apocalypse when he speaks of experiencing 'revelation'.

When I discovered this, I thought somebody is telling me I have to write this novel because [Hoover] provided the link with the Soviet explosion on the other side of the world and allowed me to introduce it into the frame of the ballgame. If Hoover hadn't been

at the game, I don't know if there would have been a novel.
(O'Toole)

Once I found out that Hoover had been at the game, it struck me with the force of revelation, because it meant that I had someone in the Polo Grounds who was intimately connected to what had happened at Kazhakstan. (Howard 14)

The second way DeLillo connects the topics is through the juxtaposition of the baseball game and the Bruegel painting *The Triumph of Death* which is printed on the pages of *Life* magazine which Hoover holds in his hands while at the game.²³ Since he has just received the news of the Soviet test, Hoover instantly interprets the image as a portrait of the nuclear devastation that has now become a possibility. Bruegel's painting comes to represent, at least for Hoover, a depiction of nuclear war. His making this connection at the baseball game thus ties the sport to nuclear apocalypse.

Finally, the baseball which Cotter takes home is later associated with the nuclear bomb when Marvin Lundy tells Brian that the core of a nuclear bomb is made of a piece of plutonium the same size and shape as a baseball (*Underworld* 172).

The novel's second pair of apocalypticist characters function similarly. The Harlem street preacher who makes several appearances in the novel is literally preaching the End whenever we hear him speak.²⁴ In his longest speech, he is preaching about the news that the Soviets have the Bomb. His character is paired, however, with a character *at* the Giants-Dodgers baseball game, providing another link between the nuclear and baseball. This second character is a merely a shadow, his association to the preacher made by DeLillo's description of him rather than through any dialogue.

²³ It is one of those fantastic coincidences – contingencies, DeLillo might say - of real life that Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* actually appeared in *Life* on this day.

²⁴ The evangelical in the emergency shelter in *White Noise* (135-7) prefigures this character.

...a man in the bleachers who's pacing the aisles, a neighborhood crazy, he waves his arms and mumbles, short, chunky, bushy-haired...and he's distracting the people nearby, they're yelling at him to sit down, go away, mess up, and he paces and worries, he shakes his head and moans as if he knows something's coming, or came, or went – he's receptive to things that escape the shrewdest fan. (*Underworld* 28)

The bushy-haired man still pacing in the bleachers, moaning and shaking his head--call the men in the white suits and get him outta here. Talking to himself, head-wagging like a street-corner zealot with news of some distant affliction dragging ever closer. (*Underworld* 39)

The third pair of apocalypticist characters is similar in more than their eschatological leanings. J. Edgar Hoover and Sister Edgar share a name and a compulsive fear of germs. Both see the world in Manichean terms and both are authority figures within their professions. In these particularities, the reader is encouraged to actually see them as twinned.²⁵ Once again, one character is associated with the religious sphere of apocalypse, and the other with the secular, nuclear sphere.

But here both also represent alternative sense-making structures, with Hoover representing a man-made system of law, and Sister Edgar a divine code in religion. Neither of these sense-making paradigms stand up any better than the apocalyptic myth, however. DeLillo undermines both law and religion as organizational paradigms, mainly through the quirks of the character representing the system. When Sister Edgar is depicted as a nun without faith or Hoover as a law-enforcer more interested in power than justice, their failings as people also reflect on the systems which they are supposed to represent. In other cases, DeLillo undermines these paradigms with comedy, as when Nick reacts against the

²⁵ In the novel's final section, however, DeLillo uses the word 'join', saying the two Edgars are 'biological opposites' and Hoover the Sister's 'male half' (826). Such language suggests they are not twins, but two parts of the same whole.

erection of a recreational mini-golf course at what is supposed to be the site of his punishment, the juvenile correction centre.

Still, both characters are apocalyptically-minded. Sister Edgar takes pleasure in drilling her students for imminent nuclear attacks and her preoccupation with death is indicated in such details as her attachment to Poe's poem 'The Raven' and her certainty that Ismael, the graffiti artist, is dying of AIDS, though apparently he is not.²⁶ Hoover is not merely the conduit by which Bruegel's apocalyptic imagery is introduced into the novel; his is the voice which describes it as a 'landscape of visionary ruin and havoc' and Hoover will keep this image with him throughout the remainder of his life, as if it is *his* vision (Underworld 41).

While these pairs of eschatological figures only allude to the novel's preoccupation with apocalypse, the comedian Lenny Bruce and baseball memorabilia collector Marvin Lundy are the novel's overt apocalyptists.²⁷ In Lundy and Bruce, DeLillo has created prophetic counterpoints: Bruce is the Jeremiah figure who warns 'We're all gonna die!' in anticipation of the (what seems to be certain) nuclear End and Lundy is that same Jeremiah figure after the apocalypse has been not just disconfirmed, but dismantled entirely.

Lundy is Bruce's nuclear shadow, a doubling role which is unmistakably implied through the two men's similar manners of speech and preoccupations with nuclear threat and its meaning for those who live under it. Both men are New Yorkers and both are jokesters

²⁶ Irving Malin and Joseph Dewey have done a wonderful reading of DeLillo's use of 'The Raven' in which they claim that Edgar Allan Poe is the third Edgar who mediates between the two Edgar characters of the novel. Poe himself alludes to greater apocalyptic sensibilities in 'The Raven' through his references to prophets and specifically in the line 'is there balm in Gilead?' which refers to the apocalyptic prophecy of Jeremiah. The name choice of 'Ismael' once again alludes to *Moby Dick*.

²⁷ DeLillo's Lenny Bruce is not historically accurate. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the real Bruce was playing the same club in Los Angeles the entire time. Moreover, the real Bruce made no (verifiable) comment on the Cuban Missile Crisis, a fact which surprised DeLillo enormously: 'It seemed to me that here was a guy who should have but evidently did not deliver [a political commentary] at the time, so I decided to do it for him' (Friedman).

with strong ethnic argots. While it may be true, as Peter Knight argues, that for other Underworld characters a sense of before and after is not immediately recognizable, this is clearly not the case for Lenny Bruce and Marvin Lundy (285). With their shared fixation but different historical perspectives they act as bookends for one of the novel's central questions: How do we live with (and without) the threat of the End?

If Bruce is the wailing Jeremiah warning of the End, Marvin Lundy is his weaker echo, reflecting that vision back upon itself. Marvin Lundy is the portrait of the apocalyptic prophet after the imminent threat he has predicted fails to occur. He is, in fact, the figure Gene Marine posited when he wrote that Lenny Bruce, if he had survived to old age, would not have been a countercultural hero because he could not have been the hero of any culture in which he lived (60). If Marine is correct, then one imagines that what Bruce might have become, had he lived, is Marvin Lundy, a connection DeLillo makes explicit when he describes Lundy as 'some retired stand-up comic who will not live a minute longer than his last monopolized conversation' (Underworld 168). And towards the very end, Bruce's existence did in fact resemble Lundy's. Secreted away in his Los Angeles bungalow with his trial transcripts, ill and babbling obsessively and incessantly about all he had lost and how he was going to get it back, Bruce bears striking similarities to Lundy with his basement hideaway and obsessive thoughts of baseball and the past.

Unlike the other pairs of apocalypticist characters, neither of these men is overtly associated with religion, nor, truly, with the nuclear. But their function is different from the other pairs. If the others are meant to draw analogies between religious and secular apocalypse, Bruce and Lundy are created to analyze its role.

DeLillo's choice of Lenny Bruce as an apocalyptic prophet may at first seem a strange one, but in reality it is canny.²⁸ Critics who watched the real Bruce interpreted his act as more than mere comedy. They used words like 'guru', 'exorciser', 'witchdoctor', and, most often, 'prophet' to describe him. Kenneth Tynan, for instance, wrote that the 'troubled voice of Lenny Bruce' was 'bringing news of impending chaos, a tightrope walker between morality and nihilism' and called Bruce 'a nightclub Cassandra' (xi). Other reviews described Bruce as 'messianically involved', 'looking like a bearded rabbi in the garb of the concentration camp', or 'a prophet of the new morality' (Weaver 138; Goldman 13; Miller 150). Such descriptions must have both shaped and reflected DeLillo's own vision of Lenny Bruce as the apocalyptic prophet he needed for his novel and he therefore uses Bruce to articulate some of the complicated responses to imminent apocalypse.

DeLillo's Bruce suggests how we derive philosophical meaning from and make organizational sense of apocalyptic terror when he says, 'I dig it on one level. Being on the brink. It's a rush, man' (*Underworld* 505). Here, at the moment of imminent threat, hipster Bruce, like Kermode, recognizes it is the imminence of the End which gives the present its shape and meaning. When Bruce amends his cry to 'We're not gonna die!' the reader is right to read this as a lamentation for the vanished End. A true apocalypticist yearns for the End, knowing that New Jerusalem awaits the faithful after the Last Judgment. Like the Pilgrims before him, DeLillo's Bruce has a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration - expressed in his boredom with his routine and exasperation with his audience - that is born of his recognition that the promised New Jerusalem meant to follow the End has slipped away and eluded his grasp.

²⁸ As in the case of the Harlem preacher, DeLillo's Bruce is prefigured in several other earlier characterizations in *White Noise*. See Heinrich's performance in the shelter (131) for physical foreshadowing, and Winnie's speech (228) and the narrator of the near-plane crash (92) for verbal echoes.

They laughed, he moped. He did the old bits with suitable stinging irony but this only made them funnier and got him more depressed. They laughed, he bled. Lenny felt awful. He was supposed to be happy and revitalized but he wasn't. They'd all survived a hellish week and he'd gone dragging through four club dates coast to coast in a state of graduated disarray and now it was over and he was safe and he was appearing in concert and he should have been standing here chanting *We're not gonna die We're not gonna die We're not gonna die*, leading them in a chant, a mantra that was joyful and mock joyful at the same time because this is New York, New York and we want it both ways....

The old material was making him feel bad. And the laughs were worse than the jokes. The laughs dashed and disheartened him. (Underworld 629)

Bruce can only mope about the lost opportunity. It is left to Marvin Lundy, a man who has seen the Cold War and its promise of eschatological salvation fall with the Berlin Wall, to mourn the loss of the apocalyptic threat.

Slightly bitter, uneasily resigned, Lundy is a man who has lived beyond the almost-apocalypse and is therefore in the position to which Kermode refers when he writes of living 'past the end, so as to see the structure whole' (8). Lundy is able to articulate how the loss of apocalyptic expectation is at least as complicated as the expectation itself. Where Bruce verbalizes the response to imminent apocalypse, Lundy articulates the complicated response to disconfirmed apocalypse. He pines for the Manichean simplicity of the lost threat of the Cold War, telling Brian Glassic, 'You don't know that every privilege in your life and every thought in your mind depends on the ability of the two great powers to hang a threat over the planet?' (Underworld 182)

His preoccupation with baseball memorabilia signals that Lundy is the character most affiliated with nostalgia. Because of this, it comes as no surprise that he should also

articulate the complicated nostalgia for a time when good and evil seemed clearly delineated.

People who save these bats and balls and preserve the old stories through the spoken word and know the nicknames of a thousand players, we're here in our basements with tremendous history on our walls. And I'll tell you something, you'll see I'm right. There's men in the coming years they'll pay fortunes for these objects. They'll pay unbelievable. Because this is desperation speaking. (Underworld 182)

This speech echoes a similar speech which Lenny Bruce makes onstage in which he posits that 'all this cold war junk is gonna be worth plenty, as quaint memorabilia' (Underworld 593), making explicit the nostalgia for apocalyptic expectation.

Lundy doesn't initially mention the nuclear, but he certainly comprehends the connection between the Cold War and baseball, even if Brian, to whom he 'preaches', does not. Brian has come to see Marvin 'to surrender himself to longing' and he believes this is only a longing for old cars and baseball. When Lundy reminisces about the Cold War, Brian tells him he came to talk about baseball, not Russia. Lundy responds that these are the same thing and suggests that what made the Giants-Dodgers game important was not the Thomson homer but that the Russians exploded an atomic bomb at the same time.

There were twenty thousand empty seats. You know why?...Because certain events have a quality of unconscious fear. I believe in my heart that people sensed some catastrophe in the air. Not who would win or lose the game. Some awful force that would obliterate...the whole thing of the game....In other words there was a hidden mentality of let's stay home. Because a threat was hanging in the air....People had a premonition that this game was related to something much bigger. (Underworld 171-2)

Thus, Brian's desire to 'surrender himself to longing' is tied to DeLillo's opening line, 'Longing on a large scale is what makes history' (Underworld 11). When Marvin tells Brian, 'And you don't know that once this threat begins to fade?...You're the lost man of history' (182), he articulates DeLillo's suspicion that there is a nostalgia for the Cold War. Lundy espouses the fetishization of history to which Jean Baudrillard refers when he writes of history becoming a 'lost referential' (43).

But there is a second longing which DeLillo explores in this novel. Lundy suggests that what we lose when the apocalyptic paradigm is removed as a frame is a clear sense of good and evil, and the corresponding sense of ourselves as one of those groups. But elsewhere in DeLillo's work the author explores an equally problematic loss: the loss of judgment. This is not a notion as extensively explored in Underworld but its repetition as a motif in his work seems to imply that DeLillo has considered that judgment might be one of the attractions of the apocalyptic expectation. This is a different kind of longing, the longing for punishment, and each of DeLillo's apocalyptic novels raises this issue of punishment.

In End Zone, Gary, who feels guilty for his part in a bad tackle in which a player was killed, chooses exile at Logos College as part of his self-inflicted punishment. He and Taft Robinson have a conversation near the end of the novel in which they discuss how Coach Creed recruited them. Gary notes how Creed is compelling because he is 'one of those men who never stops suffering' (End Zone 194). Taft agrees:

He was part Satan, part Saint Francis or somebody. He offered nothing but work and pain. He'd whisper in my ear....At times he made it sound like some kind of epic battle, him against me....Other times, he'd sweet-talk me – but not with prospects of glory. No, he'd tell me about the work, the pain, the sacrifice.

What it might make of me. How I needed it. How I secretly wanted it. (End Zone 195)

When Gary is not, to his mind, punished, but rewarded instead with the captainship of the team, even though he has walked out of the middle of a game stoned, he takes things into his own hands and nearly starves himself to death, besting even St. Teresa of Avila whose picture hangs in Creed's office.²⁹

In White Noise, on the other hand, Jack is encouraged to take up the role of punisher, what Murray has called the killer, instead of the dier. But the only reason why Jack attempts this role is that there is someone he wants to punish. While he tries to maintain the aloofness of a dispassionate intellectual about Babette's affair with Mink, empathizing with the fear which drove her to it, he finds himself ultimately wanting to punish Mink. What is interesting in this scene is that it is unclear whether Jack is punishing Mink for his affair with Babette or for being the bearer of bad news: that even though there will one day be an effective medication for the fear of death, it will be 'followed by a greater death. More effective, productwise' (White Noise 308).³⁰ When Jack realizes that Mink means that 'death adapts' and 'eludes our attempts to reason with it', when he realizes that he is still going to die whether he is afraid to or not, he shoots Mink (White Noise 308). But the fact that he not only fails to kill Mink, but also brings him to the hospital and is shot himself suggests that punishment has failed here, just as it fails at Logos College.

²⁹ One might read Gary's decision to play in the team's final game while stoned as another attempt to punish himself, since when Myna first suggests it, his response is, 'I'd get killed. I'd have no coordination. I'd just stand there and get hit. They'd kill me. They'd tear me to pieces' (End Zone 137). Given the force of his original objection, his decision to play stoned anyway seems to be related to his desire for mortification.

³⁰ Babette points out a third option: that Jack is reflexively acting out the expected gendered response to adultery.

In Underworld, Nick Shay is the character around whom this conceit is organized.

Throughout the novel the reader sees Nick suffering bouts of insomnia, but in none of these scenes is the reader given access to what Nick is thinking. We know only that he is thinking about the Bronx where he grew up. It is late in the novel that we learn that Nick has killed a man, and it is only after we know this fact that the section in which Nick talks about his incarceration begins to make sense. Only now does the reader begin to understand that what is bothering Nick is that he does not feel adequately punished for what he perceives as a terrible act.³¹

Crucially, DeLillo ties Nick's desire to punishment to the desire for a sense-making paradigm.³² 'When I entered correction I wanted things to make sense,' Nick says, adding, 'The minute I entered correction I was a convert to the system....I believed in the stern logic of correction' (Underworld 502). It is no coincidence that Nick uses the term 'correction' so repeatedly. This is what he longs for.

I didn't want sweetheart treatment. I was here to do time, one and half to three, and all I wanted from the system was method and regularity. When the kitchen caught fire I was disappointed. I took it personally. I didn't understand how a well-trained staff could allow this to happen. When three kids went out the gate in the rear of a bakery truck...I thought it was a tremendous, what, a dereliction, a collapse...I was shocked at the level of neglect...We weren't worth much if the system designed to contain us kept breaking down. (Underworld 503)

³¹ John W. Aldridge suggests the connection between religion and punishment when he writes that, 'disaster has become not only our central preoccupying experience, but our principal fantasy of salvation. If religions of the past offered promise of some form of transcendental redemption, disaster holds out the possibility of infinite and deliciously horrible forms of damnation, the ultimate titillation to orgasm of world holocaust, which in our ultimate boredom is one of the very few experiences left that is likely to bring us to feeling' (10-11)

³² Catholicism is another sense-making paradigm which deals with correction and punishment, and it too works at both a personal and social level.

Nick's comments are best understood juxtaposed against Lenny Bruce's 'We're all gonna die!' routine. When the Cuban Missile Crisis ends, Bruce feels depressed even though he recognizes he ought to feel elated. Abandoning an old routine for 'a better idea, deeper, more challenging' (Underworld 632), Bruce launches into a story which the reader will recognize as Esmeralda's biography. Later the reader learns that Esmeralda has been murdered. From this, we can take it that the deeper, more challenging idea which has occurred to Bruce is that we're *still* gonna die, and when we do it won't be with the import of apocalypse to make it worthy. We're still gonna die, and judgment has nothing to do with it. This revelation further indicates that DeLillo sees the apocalyptic paradigm as a failed one in terms of sense-making.

Nick's response, then, to the absurdities of his jail time is best understood as a reaction against this idea. Watching the installation of a miniature golf course, he says indignantly,

I felt tricked and betrayed. I was here on a serious charge, a homicide by whatever name, destruction of life under whatever bureaucratic label, and this was where I belonged, confined upstate, but the people who put me here were trifling with my mind. (Underworld 503)

It is not only that the system of correction turns out not to be a workable sense-making system which bothers him, but also the fact that he does not feel adequately punished and desires it. Without it, Nick implies, he cannot define himself.

Ultimately, one should understand the failure of the apocalyptic myth as a sense-making paradigm as an indictment of sorts on the idea of New Jerusalem. DeLillo seems to imply that the random and arbitrary nature of contemporary life is our bane to live with, and

that there is no sense-making paradigm, mythic or otherwise, which can comfort those who feel lost in the white noise. David Cowart has argued that DeLillo's fiction is radical because, even though it is clear the author recognizes 'that myth reflects only the order-hungry needs of the psyche', he chooses to deny myth altogether (Don DeLillo 8). He is, Cowart argues, 'resistant to the seductive appeal of totalizing theories, comprehensive accounts of the phenomenal world and the human place in it' (Don DeLillo 9). Underworld's undermining of so many sense-making paradigms, including the mythic apocalyptic one, would seem to support such an assertion.

This interpretation is in line with DeLillo's opinion that 'art is one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world' (DeCurtis 66). On numerous occasions, DeLillo – like Vonnegut - has positioned fiction as a means of organizing reality and giving it the meaning which humans seek. Claiming that people 'seek pattern in art that eludes us in natural experience' (DeCurtis 66), DeLillo has commented that:

I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it can also operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don't encounter elsewhere. (DeCurtis 56)

I am suggesting that it is possible to make up stories in order to soothe the dissatisfactions of the past, take the edge off the uncertainties. (Goldstein 56)

Paradoxically, then, the theory of fiction which Win Everett states as he plans a near-miss assassination of Kennedy in Libra – that 'there is a tendency of plots to move toward

death' (221) – is undermined by DeLillo's own ideas about the purpose of plotting. But perhaps critics ought never to have taken Everett's comment so seriously, since in the earlier novel White Noise DeLillo was already questioning the notion. In it, Jack gives a lecture in which he says:

All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot. (26)

But then Jack immediately asks himself, 'Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?' (26) Perhaps critics ought to pay more attention to Murray Jay Siskind's words on plot rather than Everett's, since they appear more in line with DeLillo's own comments about plotting and fiction:

To plot is to live....As we surge up into the world, we try to devise a shape, a plan. There is dignity in this. Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that's not the point. To plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control....This is how we advance the art of human consciousness'. (White Noise 291-2)

CONCLUSION

A few words in conclusion about the paradoxes of the apocalyptic paradigm. Like a Russian matrioshka doll with its increasingly smaller dolls nestled one inside the other, the apocalyptic paradigm has paradoxes nestled within paradoxes.

Authors who incorporate the apocalyptic paradigm into their work are a case of real life imitating art. Just as they conflate apocalyptic roles in their characters, these authors are simultaneously conflating several apocalyptic roles in their own persons.

As Douglas Robinson points out, ‘an author in the process of creating and ending his or her text becomes an analogue of God creating and ending the world’ (7). As creators of their fictional worlds, these authors are the deity figures who demolish their creations and then bestow New Jerusalem on their characters. In this deity role they render judgment on their characters, deciding who shall be among the ‘saved’ and who will not.

Yet they simultaneously occupy the prophet role of the paradigm. Moreover, they are – paradox within paradox – both regular prophets *and* apocalyptists. As the teller of End-time stories and forecasters of the destruction of their created worlds, these artists are in the apocalyptist role, heralding the end of a ‘world’ which cannot be avoided since they have committed it to page or screen.

But on a metaphysical level, as artists who use the apocalyptic paradigm in its critical function, they seek to *change* the real world outside their fiction. Most of the artists I have looked at in this study are functioning as social critics as well as a tellers of eschatological tales. If there is anything to be gained from telling scary stories about horrible ends to come, perhaps it is that one might ‘scare his reader straight’, so to speak.

These authors deliberately point to the errors of the human race and extrapolate an outcome of those errors which leads to the big End.

My choice of the word 'extrapolate' is deliberate here, for I want to suggest the sense of possible futures. Granted, we cannot be sure – *à la* Vonnegut - of where in the evolutionary process we are, but we can be sure that we are not at the End *yet*. It is this *yet* which is imperative, for it implies that we might *yet* avoid the End, too. Hence, artists and authors who adopt the apocalyptic paradigm are *hopeful* of affecting the very world of the readers which they choose to portray as *hopelessly* racing toward the End.

Yet the adoption of the apocalyptic stance against the social order is itself paradoxical, for as I pointed out earlier, the apocalyptic sensibility assumes that no rehabilitation is possible.

Still another paradox to consider is how apocalyptic narrative defies the very thing it purports to be: a story of the End. It is, as Lois Parkinson Zamora points out, a story which mocks endings, and it does so in two notable ways (Writing the Apocalypse 17). First, in its depiction and promise of a New Jerusalem, it essentially promises another beginning *beyond* the End. One may not be among the group which gets to experience that new beginning, but for that elite group at least there is no Ending at all.

Secondly, and again on a metaphysical level, by virtue of the fact that these apocalyptic narratives are contained in physical artifacts such as books and films, these Endings may be experienced *repeatedly*. So while apocalyptic narrative purports to be the definitive story of the End, Frederick A. Kreuziger is correct to note that apocalyptic literature 'reveals the end – not of the world so much, as of the story. It is not the end of the world which is demanded in apocalypse, it is the end of the story' (8). Because one may

return to this story again and again, re-experiencing the 'definitive' End, Joseph Dewey's observation that there has been a 'growing sense, during last two centuries, that the end of the world is a fiction' may be entirely valid (In A Dark Time 16). As a plot, then, the apocalyptic paradigm also contains a number of paradoxes within it.

Finally, within the texts studied here there is another paradox specific to the group. For a number of these authors, their exploration of the apocalyptic paradigm and sensibility leads them to the conclusion that it is a failed paradigm, that as a sense-making structure, the apocalyptic paradigm is just as fallible as any other. For these authors the apocalyptic paradigm does not lead to consolation, and, to the contrary, might make the world a less pleasant place in which to live.

Instead, Moore, Vonnegut and DeLillo all propose that art is our only recourse, our only means of consolation. With their respective 'creation of the appreciation of art' and 'art is one of the consolation prizes we receive' comments, Vonnegut and DeLillo both make it clear that in their personal lives, as authors with philosophies, they see art and fiction as a means of salvation and comfort. Moore implies this same philosophy when he has his Watchmen character Laurie argue for the human race on the basis of its artistic capabilities.

Yet, within these author's apocalyptic texts we often find them undermining exactly this idea. In Watchmen, for instance, artists play a pivotal role in the creation of the alien monster which destroys New York. Vonnegut's Galápagos undermines art through its depiction of Mandarax as irrelevant, Leon's *laissez-faire* attitude about the durability and importance of what he's recorded, and the impugning of science fiction and by extension fiction/art. What does it mean therefore when DeLillo simultaneously holds up art as our only consolation but then undermines language as a containing or sense-making structure in

his novels, as he does in End Zone? What does it suggest when narrative images – whether in comic form or film – undermine notions of seeing, and by extension the idea that ‘seeing is believing’, that somehow we can know the truth by what we experience? By playing tricks with language and visuals, these authors and film-makers undermine our ability to know or make sense of our world. Art, in their cases, potentially becomes part of the white noise and confusion, and not, as they posit, the consolatory answer. It reflects the noise back at us and does not necessarily offer keys to understanding it.¹

In his analysis of the creative response to the first atomic bomb, Paul Boyers points out that the paradoxical response to this literal threat of the end was linguistic paralysis, an inability to form a creative response.² But oddly the converse appears to be true, as well: that the non-occurrence of the expected end has sparked a creative response which is far from linguistically paralyzed. Despite the gloomy expectation of nuclear war, the conclusion of the Cold War has seen its two main enemies ‘stand down’ their nuclear postures, at least publicly. Perhaps the natural response to the lifting of this particular terror is to begin to examine the effect that terror has had on us and the ways, both in terms of paradigms and rhetoric, that we have framed that terror.

The artists who have taken up this exploration are often the ones we would least think of as ‘linguistically paralyzed’, the ones whose reputation are based in part on their

¹ This playfulness itself might be the consolation, of course. But being (as John Barth framed it) lost in the funhouse is little consolation to those who just want to know the way out.

² The lack of noteworthy creative responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 may bear out Boyer’s argument. The temporal proximity to a paradigm-shaking event may preclude serious creative response to it. Only now are we seeing fiction which appears to incorporate 9/11 in meaningful ways, as in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. But even then, the author cannot look directly at the event itself, but must come at it in a roundabout way. Thus the most ‘successful’ creative responses to 9/11, such as the film *9’11’01 (September 11, 2001)*, address the terrorist attacks by focusing on countries and conflicts *outside* the event itself. See Wyatt for more on the literary response.

affinity for 'playing' with language.³ As Postmodernists it may be that they cannot bring themselves to deliver their thoughts on the topic of the apocalyptic paradigm in a serious way, but their playful or ironic tone should not preclude the reader from seriously considering their observations about the apocalyptic paradigm or its rhetoric.

In the past twenty years our eschatological fears have begun to take on different forms. The rhetoric surrounding global-warming is clearly cataclysmic and usually apocalyptic in tenor. We have only to watch the 2004 Hollywood blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* to see how the issue of ecological destruction is being slotted into an apocalyptic paradigm.⁴ Particularly since the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center, we find that it is no longer nuclear war which keeps us awake at night, but thoughts of biological or chemical terrorism. If the nuclear occupies our thoughts now it is usually in this new form: as the dirty bomb set off by a terrorist, a figure easily adapted to an Antichrist trope. If Frank Kermode is correct about the adaptability of the apocalyptic paradigm to new circumstances, one would expect to see these new eschatological terrors re-figured in terms of the apocalyptic paradigm in some ten or twenty years. But perhaps only if the circumstances which they imagine fail to actually occur.

³ I include film as a 'language' here.

⁴ See Milligan.

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This list has two functions: it delineates the general research background to the thesis, indicating works which were consulted even though no extracts appear in the thesis itself; and it offers a guide to further reading. For this reason it is arranged by author and topic rather than as a general alphabetical list.

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Appendix A



Appendix B



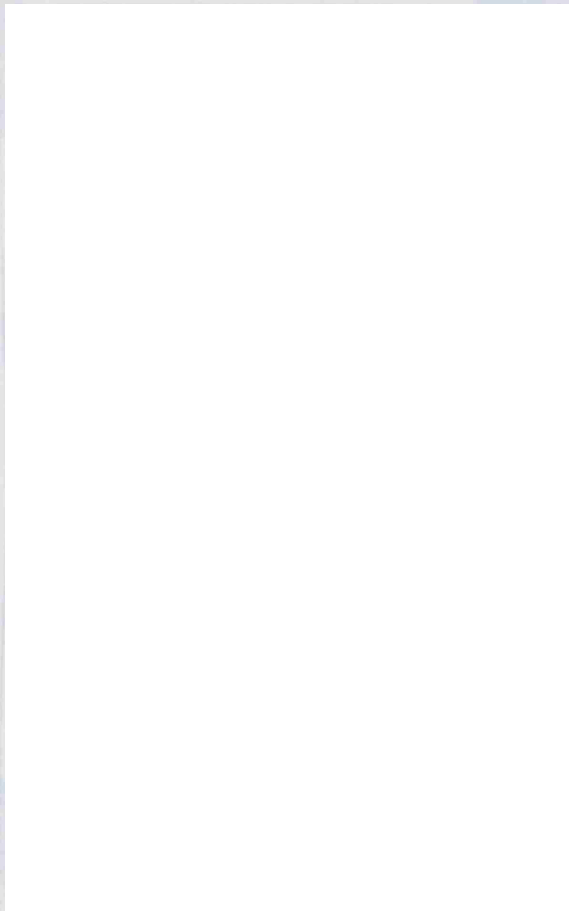
**Picture-book Apocalypse with
Explanatory inscriptions from
the commentary of Berengaudus
After c. 1350**



**St John's Vision of the Seven
Candlesticks
Albrecht Dürer, 1498**




**The Fall of Babylon
John Martin, 1831**




**The Apocalypse:
The Subject, 1st variation: The Plague
Jacob Pins, 1946**

**The Apocalypse
2nd variation: The War
Jacob Pins, 1946**



The Whore of Babylon
William Blake, 1809

Fifth Angel Rains Fire from the Sky
McKendree Robbins Long, late 1960s



***Ghostbusters* (1984)**
Ivan Reitman, dir.

Appendix C

Piece of Alan Moore script for 'The Mirror of Love'

<http://www.comicon.com/moore/mirror.htm>

MAD LOVE PUBLISHING

AARGH

'THE MIRROR OF LOVE' (8 PAGES)

PAGE 1,
(PANEL) 1.

OKAY, THIS STRIP HAS FIVE PANELS IN EXACTLY THE SAME LAYOUT UPON EACH PAGE: THERE ARE FOUR HORIZONTAL PANELS DOWN THE LEFT HAND SIDE OF EACH PAGE AND A TALL VERTICAL ONE DOWN THE RIGHT. SINCE I'VE HAD TO FIT THE ENTIRE OF KNOWN GAY HISTORY FROM PREHISTORIC TIMES ONWARDS INTO EIGHT PAGES, THERE ARE ABOUT TWO HUNDRED AND TEN WORDS ON EACH PAGE AND SOME RATHER LARGE CAPTIONS. SINCE THERE ARE NO BALLOONS I FIGURE YOU'LL BE ABLE TO LAY OUT THE PANELS TO ACCOMODATE THESE. THE HORIZONTAL PANELS ALL RECOUNT SCENES AND EVENTS FROM GAY HISTORY, WHILE THE VERTICAL PANELS ARE DIFFERENT. USING BEARDSLEY'S HERMAPHRODITE ANGEL FROM HIS PICTURE 'THE MIRROR OF LOVE', WHAT WE DO IS SHOW TWO SUCH FIGURES AGAINST A BLACK BACKGROUND, RENDERED IN SOME FASHION THAT HEIGHTENS THAT SENSE OF PRE-RAPHAELITE CLASSIC SENSIBILITY. THE TWO FIGURES ARE IDENTICAL WINGED ANDROGYNES WITH DUAL GENITALIA AND THEY ARE ALWAYS POSITIONED ALMOST PERFECTLY SYMMETRICALLY IN THE TALL PANELS SO THAT THEY MIGHT BE MIRROR IMAGES OF EACH OTHER, EXCEPT IN THE PANELS WHERE THEY PHYSICALLY INTERLOCK. THE HORIZONTAL HISTORICAL PANELS COULD MAYBE BE DONE WITH A DUOTONE BOARD OR SOMETHING, TO DIFFERENTIATE THEIR RUGGED HISTORY IN FEEL FROM THE ETHEREAL PANELS WITH THE WINGED, ANGELIC HERMAPHRODITES AT PLAY. IMAGINE IT IN A SORT OF E.C. DOCUMENTARY STYLE, ALTHOUGH RENDERED BY ONE OF THEIR MORE EXPERIMENTAL ARTISTS, LIKE KRIGSTEIN OR SOMEBODY. SEE WHAT YOU THINK, ANYWAY, AND I'LL OBVIOUSLY LEAVE THE FINAL STYLISTIC DECISIONS IN YOUR MORE-THAN-CAPABLE HANDS. RIGHT..THIS FIRST PANEL IS A SEA BED SHOT, SHOWING TWO DOLPHINS AT PLAY. THEY ARE SWOOPING DOWN PLAYFULLY TO GRAZE THE OCEAN'S SANDY BOTTOM BEFORE SWOOPING UP AGAIN IN A GRACEFUL CURVE. THEY SWIM SO THAT ONE IS SLIGHTLY BEHIND THE OTHER, BACK TO BELLY ALTHOUGH PERHAPS NOT QUITE TOUCHING, THEIR BROAD HEADS THROWN BACK AS THEY SWOOP BY WITH THEIR BELLIES TOWARDS US, A CLOUD OF DISTURBED SEDIMENT BILLOWING UP WHERE THEY GRAZE THE OCEAN BED. THEY MIGHT BE MATING OR JUST PLAYING... WE CANNOT BE SURE, BUT ON THEIR FLAT CETACEAN FACES THEY WEAR WIDE INHUMAN SMILES, ECSTATIC IN THE DEEP-SEA TWILIGHT, SILVER BUBBLES RISING ALL AROUND.

CAP. : Even preceding landfall, things loved freely once, ignoring gender. Blind desire made pond-slime fish, turned fish to apes with sex, life's glorious engine, churning in the mud.

CAP. : The animals remember: Dolphins still rotate their matings between their own sex and its reverse, their raptures echoing for miles.

PAGE 1.
(PANEL) 2.

NOW WE HAVE A WIDE SCREEN SHOT OF THE FIRST SOCIETY, A HERD OF FEMALES

SLEEPING WITH THEIR YOUNG, THE CREATURES THAT WE SEE HERE ARE HOMINIDS, AND THE FEMALES THAT WE SEE IN THE FOREGROUND ARE SLEEPING PEACEFULLY BENEATH THE PREHISTORIC NIGHT SKY, HAIRY ARMS DRAPED CASUALLY ACROSS EACH OTHER, SLEEPING CHEEKS RESTING AGAINST FURRY FLANKS. ONE OF THE FEMALES HAS A SMALL AND MONKEY-LIKE CHILD CLASPED SLEEPING TO HER PENDULOUS BREASTS. AWAY ACROSS THE NIGHT CLEARING, BEYOND THE IDYLLICALLY DREAMING HERD THAT WE SEE SUGGESTED IN THE F/G WE CAN SEE THE SLOUCHING, KNUCKLE-DRAGGING FIGURES OF A FEW MALE HOMINIDS, WATCHING WARILY AND SOMEWHAT JEALOUSLY FROM NEAR THE DISTANT TREE LINE, PERHAPS JUST SEEN HERE AS WHITE SILHOUETTES AGAINST THE JUNGLE DARK.

CAP. : On land the first societies, great herds of she-beasts, raised their young together, without males, whose part in reproduction was unknown.

CAP. : The women licked and groomed each other with men watching, circling, circling round...

(PANEL) 3.

NOW WE ARE UP TO AROUND 3000 B.C, IN ANCIENT SUMER AND THEREABOUTS. IN THE F/G HERE STANDS A MALE PRIEST, WITH THE ALTAR THAT HE IS STANDING BEFORE MERCIFULLY OFF PANEL BELOW. THE PRIEST HAS HIS LEATHERY AND FANATICAL FACE TURNED TOWARDS THE BOILING CLOUDS THAT FILL THE HEAVENS AND HAS HIS HANDS RAISED TO THE ANGRY- LOOKING SKY, ONE HAS THE FINGERS STRETCHED, BESEECHING, OUTWARDS. IN THE OTHER HAND HE HOLDS A KNIFE, BOTH KNIFE AND HAND AND FOREARM RUNNING WITH FRESH BLOOD THAT TRICKLES AND DRIPS. TO THE LEFT OF THE PICTURE, IN THE NEAR B/G, WE SEE A SCREAMING AND HORRIFIED WOMEN BEING HELD BACK BY A GRIM-FACED ACOLYTE AS SHE VAINLY TRIES TO STRUGGLE FORWARD, REACHING OUT ONE HAND TOWARDS THE GRIM SCENE IN THE F/G. HER TINY-PUPILLED, HORROR-WIDENED EYES ARE FIXED UPON A POINT OFF PANEL JUST BELOW THE LOWER BORDER, OVERHEAD, THE SKY CHURNS DARKLY.

CAP. : In the beginning then, three million years of motherhood.

CAP. : The WORD came LATER, and the word was power, was patriarchy: Firstborn children squirmed on altars of a father God.

CAP. : The Word was LAW: In Sumer, women scorning men had teeth crushed with burned bricks.

(PANEL) 4

NOW JUST A CLOSE UP OF A PAIR OF STRONG AND SUNTANNED CLEARLY-MASCULINE HANDS, THOSE OF AN ELDERLY MALE, AS THEY ENTER FROM THE LEFT OF THE FOREGROUND. ONE HAND HOLDS A CRUDE HAMMER, THE OTHER A CRUDE CHISEL, AND THE HANDS ARE PATIENTLY CHIPPING OUT A LIST OF LAWS IN ANCIENT ARAMAIC LATTERING UPON A ROUGH STONE TABLET, CHIPS OF BAKED CLAY SPRAYING THROUGH THE AIR. THE LAWS LOOK SOLID, IRREMOVABLE AND MADE TO LAST.

Appendix D



Fig. 1

Fig. 2





Fig. 3

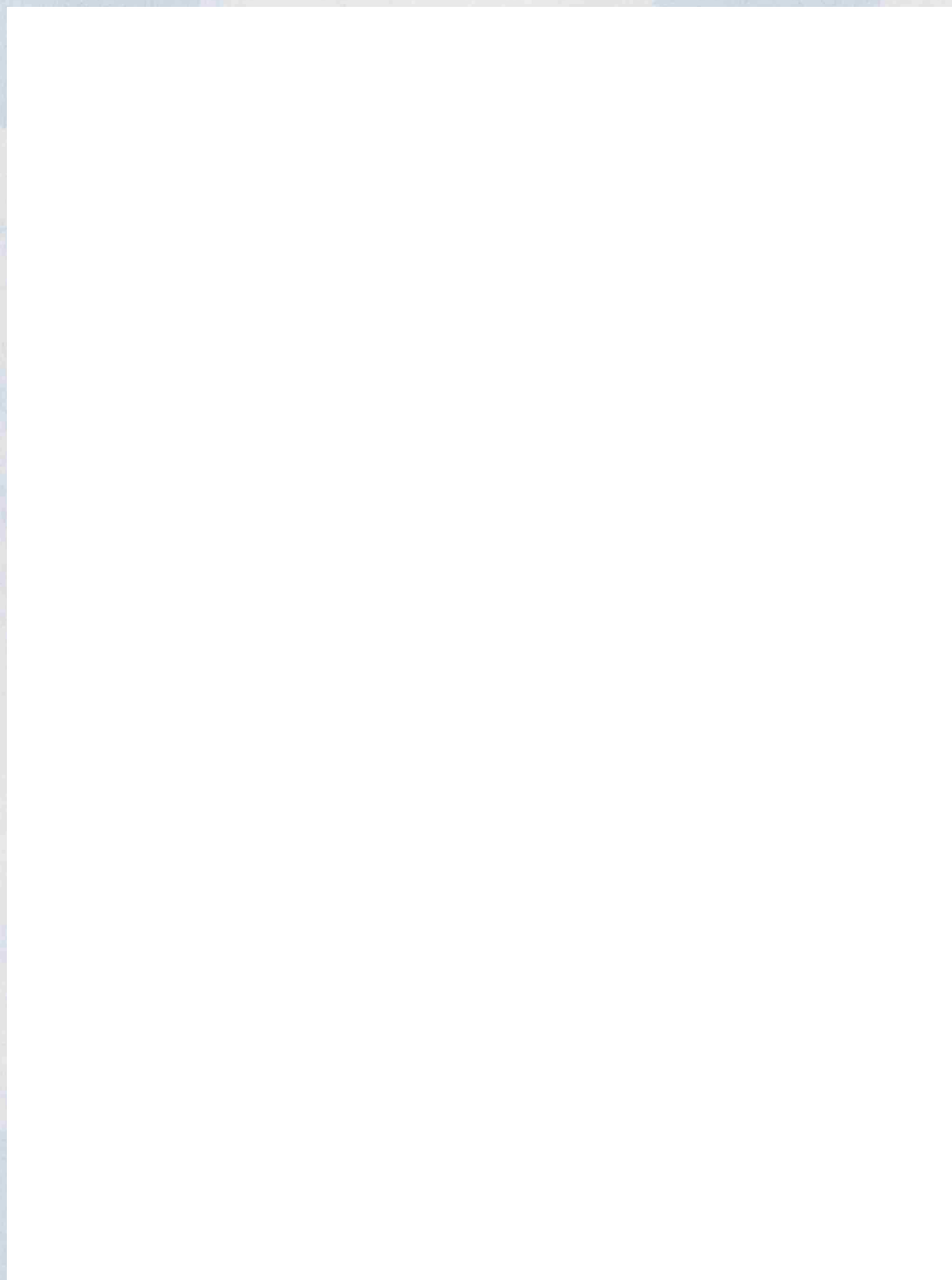


Fig. 4

Fig. 5





Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

g. 12



Fig. 13

g. 14

ig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

Appendix E

Note on the Kurt Vonnegut Collection at the Lilly Library University of Indiana (Bloomington)

Because Kurt Vonnegut's familiarity with Darwin and with anthropology in general was vital to the work I was completing, I was interested to learn that the Lilly Library's (on-line) catalogue listed among its Vonnegut collection the author's travel ephemera, his university notes from anthropology classes, and his many manuscripts in their various versions, as well as the author's 'correspondence' with other authors and his agent.

I arranged a research trip to the collection in May 2004 in order to look at any notes which Vonnegut might have made on his own trip to the Galápagos Islands, and to examine the notes he took in his anthropology classes to see whether they would show any particular interest in Darwin's theory of natural selection. Additionally, I was also hoping that I would find a letter which naturalist Stephen J. Gould sent to Vonnegut after the publication of Galápagos praising the novel's evolutionary scenario.

Unfortunately, what is listed and described in the catalogue and what is, in actuality, in the Vonnegut archive diverge. The only notes from Vonnegut's trip were in the form of an introduction he'd done for a special edition of the novel. Otherwise, the box containing his travel ephemera held old passports, tourist brochures, and the occasional ticket stub. What had been listed as notes and materials from his university anthropology classes turned out to be mostly mimeographed syllabi and reading assignments from the professors of those classes. In some cases, the boxes contained only the empty binders from those classes. In any case, the materials were from Vonnegut's social anthropology rather than physical anthropology classes. Gould's letter was not among the archived correspondence and, in fact, nothing post-1997 has yet been archived by the library. I wasn't allowed access to the un-archived materials.

While finding a copy of Vonnegut's Master's Thesis, entitled 'Fluctuations between Good and Ill Fortune in Simple Tales', yielded some interesting material since it contains the author's theories about plot and narrative structure, in general the collection was disappointing because the descriptions of what was there did not exactly match what was.

For scholars who are interested in using this collection – which does contain a large number of revised short-story manuscripts – my advice would be to write the library to specifically request details about the items they are interested in seeing before planning a trip.